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#### Recommended Citation

Gouthro, Patricia A.; Holloway, Susan M.; and Guy, Jennifer. (2017). Reading the world: Dialogical learning and conversations with fiction. *CASAE: Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education*, 36, 145-150.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/educationpub/35>

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## Reading the World: Dialogical Learning and Conversations with Fiction

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper draws upon a SSHRC funded research study on lifelong learning, fiction writing, and creativity to discuss how the work of Paulo Freire and Martha Nussbaum draw attention to the importance of education for democratic learning. Using fiction as a way to foster dialogue may enhance opportunities for adults to engage in critical debate and to rethink how they will "read the world".*

### INTRODUCTION

Critical educators note the importance of dialogue as an essential component in adult learning. Freire (2004; c. 1992) argues that educators need to foster democracy by encouraging learners to realize there are many different "readings of the world" (p. 96). Reading and writing fiction offer important ways to generate dialogical learning as learners develop the imaginative and creative capacity needed to understand diverse "readings of the world" and find ways to communicate about alternative perspectives.

This paper draws upon a SSHRC funded research study that examine connections between lifelong learning, creativity, and fiction writing through interviews with fiction authors. It begins with a critical

discussion of the importance of dialogical learning in adult education, overviews the research study that is drawn upon for discussion in this paper, shares examples of how fiction may encourage critically reflective learning by drawing upon insights shared by fiction writers, and concludes by considering the implications of using fiction as a way to foster dialogical learning amongst adults.

### DIALOGICAL LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC LEARNING

Tuckett (2013) argues that according to Freire, "the role of the teacher is to foster democratic dialogue for learning" (p. 246). Through dialogue, learners are exposed to alternative viewpoints and have the opportunity to articulate their own experiences, perceptions, and beliefs. Dialogue involves careful listening as well as thoughtful explanation. An essential aspect of engaging in democratic society involves fostering this capacity to exchange ideas, listen to various perspectives, and assess the evidence put forth to support different points of debate. Martha Nussbaum (2010) argues that "democracies all over the world are undervaluing, and consequently neglecting skills that we all badly need to keep democracies, vital, respectful, and

accountable" (p. 77). A liberal arts approach to learning encourages learners to engage in philosophical and moral debates. Although it may not always be comfortable, Connelly & Finnegan (2016) argue that dissonance can create spaces for dialogue and learning. In a democratic learning context, diverse perspectives should be acknowledged. This willingness to be open to differing opinions, to reflect upon difficult issues such as positionality and privilege, and to dream of what a more just society might look like, are all components of critical, dialogical learning.

Freire (2014; c. 1974) notes that the difference between human beings and animals is that "because they [humans] are not limited to the natural (biological) sphere but participate in the creative dimension as well, men *sic* can intervene in reality order to change it" (p. 4). Human beings have the capacity for abstract thought and to imagine alternatives to their lived experience. Dialogical learning can lead to a process of conscientization, which is a deeper understanding of the circumstances in which human beings exist as well as understanding of the possibility for alternative ways of being. This process of conscientization may then lead to social change. Freire (1998) explains:

Since the basic condition for conscientization is that its agent must be a subject (that is a conscious being), conscientization, like education, is specifically and exclusively a human process. It is as human beings that men *sic* are not only *in* the world but *with* the world, together with other men [italics in original]. Only men, as "open" beings are able to achieve the complex operation of simultaneously transforming the world by their action and grasping and expressing the world's reality in their creative language (p. 499).

This human capacity for language to engage people in learning can be seen in the way that dialogue can be used to foster educational opportunities. Jesson & Newman (2008; c. 2004) explain that "in a sense, 'conscientization' is a process by which learners are propelled into the flow of social history. They cease being objects and become writers of their own stories and their own communities' stories" (p. 258).

Through telling one's own story and reading or listening to the stories of others, important learning can occur. Fiction is a form of story telling that even though it may deal with imaginary characters, settings, and plots, deals with many important "truths". Through fiction, learners can delve into the stories of communities, both ones they may belong to and ones that are separate or distinct from their personal experiences. They can reflect upon their own lives, in connection to stories that they may write or read, and grasp the significance of different ways of being in the world.

The role of educators shifts when teaching through dialogical learning. As Allman (1994) notes, Freire's conception of learning through dialogue challenges both educators and learners to transform their relationship in radical ways, to create more democratic opportunities for learning. Both the educator and the student are expected to be open to learning, and students can learn from one another. Pulido-Rodríguez, Amado & Rodrigo (2105) explore a case study of one Spanish adult learner who discovered the democratic opportunities afforded for learning in a Freirian-based dialogic literary gathering that targeted adults with low levels of literacy by introducing them to classic literature and opening up forums for debate and discussion.

Some scholars such as Choulis (2007) warn that "dialogue favors individuals who are confident, articulate, and educated. Those who dominate societal relations, such as men, Whites, and the wealthy are able to dominate dialogue in an educational space" (p. 172). Brookfield (1995) also explores in depth some of the assumptions that educators need to consider when attempting to use dialogue as a means to foster critical learning, noting that some dialogical practices which might appear to be inclusive, such as sitting and sharing ideas in a circle, can actually undermine democratic learning opportunities. While these cautionary points are important to consider, we believe that the possibility for critical learning can still be explored through dialogical learning and encounters with fiction.

## FICTION AND DIALOGUE

Exposing learners to the imaginative world of fiction may encourage learners to engage with diverse perspectives. Although reading and writing fiction are often perceived to be solitary activities, at another level they are social encounters because they require a serious engagement across minds through language from different participants in society. Readers bring their own thoughts and background to shape the imaginative encounter of reading a fictional story, so that each reader engages with a book differently. There are many different readings of stories and readings of the world.

Nguyen (2014) talks about the possibilities for transformative learning for adult learners through storytelling and sharing experiences. For the fiction writer, writing a story is a way of crafting words and creatively using her/his imagination to think of how other people might deal with the society in which they live. Readers who reflect upon different fictional accounts can also speculate on the purpose and reasons for why a writer might choose to have character behave a certain way, make a particular decision, or encounter a particular problem. Providing a similar platform or a shared experience for learning, such as reading the same novel, can open up opportunities for discussion and dialogue. Attempting to understand the complex web of assumptions, values, and expectations that each person brings to reading a novel, is a way to gain insight into how others also “read the world” in different ways. Rather than focusing directly on personal experiences, which can create discomfort for some learners, drawing on fiction allows learners to create spaces of dissonance through discussions about characters and stories. As Jarvis (2012) argues, when used carefully, fiction can also be used in educational contexts to provide opportunities to foster empathy for others and to gain greater insights into various social issues.

#### RESEARCH STUDY

The Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) research study drawn upon for this paper examines connections between lifelong learning, fiction writing, and creativity. It involves interviews with fiction authors and with key informants – individuals working in programs to support fiction

writing. The interviews with the authors use a life history/biographical approach, in which they are asked about their life experiences in learning to become a fiction writer. The writers are also asked to reflect upon the creative process of writing fiction as a way to explore insights into teaching and learning about creativity.

#### FINDINGS

In this section, two examples are provided of authors reflecting upon how their life experiences have shaped the way that they understand the creative processes of fiction writing. One draws upon the experience of doing volunteer work in prisons, while the other discusses his paid work as a physician.

In the first example, we draw upon an interview with British crime fiction writer, Ann Cleeves, who has taught creative writing in prisons. She shares this story where she asks the group, “If you were to write the story of your life, what would the first sentence be?” Cleeves explains that she uses this pedagogical strategy:

Because one sentence is just about what people can manage if they’re starting off. And I remember it because there was this one boy who had been rather antsy through the session and I didn’t know if he had been listening. I thought he may have been on drugs, so [he was] going through withdrawal. And he said, ‘I’d start with the buckle shaped like a ship that my father beat me with’.

Immediately, with this powerful image, you can imagine what the story of his life must have been like, and from there you can conjecture a number of possible ways in which his story could develop. Cleeves uses this as an example of what could be a starting point to teach creatively with fiction. One sentence to begin to describe a life – where does it take you?

In our next example we draw upon an interview with Toronto literary writer, Vincent Lam, who is a medical doctor as well as a fiction writer. He thinks back about his experience in learning to write fiction and explains:

I think that during medical school I was so preoccupied with all the didactic learning that I never really thought about the narrative way of looking at medicine. I think I have always gravitated towards that being a strength in my clinical work, but it's not something I really thought about at all, until after I finished *Bloodletting*.

After I published *Bloodletting* and began to talk about it, and then I saw that there was this commonality...it's funny the notion of narrative medicine in and of itself is gaining prominence within medicine, but there's always been this notion of bedside manner. I think that there may have always been and I think there is a great deal of narrative within the concept of bedside manner, but people tend to view it much more simplistically...as, you know, simply a question of whether someone smiles nicely or is sympathetic or what have you.

I think it's actually far more complex. I think it actually has a great deal to do with whether the clinician can access the narrative of the person...understanding where the patient is in their story, but then also having a sense of what role the clinician themselves can play in the story. And that is going to be different from situation to situation and from person to person.

In this example, Lam explains how through his own fiction writing in the 2006 Giller prize winning novel *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures*, he explores the role of narrative and story telling in medical practice. His work challenges assumptions that scientific and technical knowledge and advances, as amazing as they are, should always take precedence over the narrative or story that is linked with illness, accidents, well-being, and physician-care. Through writing a collection of fictional stories about medical students and their emerging careers he engages creatively with many of the dilemmas, contradictions, and tensions that are connected to healthcare and the relationships between doctors and their patients.

## IMPLICATIONS

Fiction is a valuable yet often underutilized resource for teaching adults. It can be used in a variety of contexts, whether it involves having learners write their own stories or read fiction novels and engage in discussion-based activities to exchange ideas. Porres, Wildemeersch, & Simons (2013) note that dialogue is an essential component of the process of conscientization. Drawing upon fiction may be an effective pedagogical strategy to encourage adult learners to consider alternative frameworks and ways of being in the world. Doing activities such as Cleaves suggested, where you write one sentence to capture a life story and then begin from there, may encourage learners to reflect on different ways in which a story can be developed or a person's life experiences may be interpreted. Using fiction can foster the develop of critical thinking skills as well as enhance the capacity that human beings have to imagine alternative ways of being.

All too often we see that education policies and programs are influenced by neoliberal values that emphasize individuality, competition, and the values of the marketplace. Narrowly prescribed curriculum that emphasizes accountability through measurable results marginalizes the value of learning to enhance democratic participation or critical reflection.

Martha Nussbaum (2010) argues that all across the world the humanities are being threatened by those who prefer to have learners focus on a technical approach to education. Paying attention to the humanities is important though, for "even if we were just aiming just at economic success, leading corporate executives understand very well the importance of creating a corporate culture in which critical voices are not silenced" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 53). Innovation is hugely important for the economy, and a more liberal arts approach to education encourages the development of the capacity for creativity and innovation.

Even more importantly, however, Nussbaum, like Freire, argues that effective democracies require a population where citizens are capable of independent, critical thought, where educators do

not treat learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Nussbaum argues:

By emphasizing each person's active voice, we also promote a culture of accountability. When people see their own ideas as their own responsibility, they are more likely, too, to see their deeds as their own responsibility (p. 54).

As Freire talks about with his process of conscientization, learners who understand the world, and who understand the importance of words in shaping and articulating this understanding, may be then positioned to try to create a different kind of world.

Critical adult educators who wish to foster dialogical learning amongst their students need to be creative in considering their own pedagogical strategies to foster learner engagement. Reading or writing fictional stories is a way for adult learners to draw upon their own experiences to gain insights and understanding, without necessarily having to reveal intimate or personal details of their lives, unless they wish to. Through fiction learners can also move imaginatively beyond the boundaries of their own lives experience, to consider how others live and make sense of the world. Freire & Macedo (1987) argue that "reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world" (p. 35). People make sense of stories through their own lived experience, and by talking and sharing their ideas about these experiences with others. Drawing upon fiction expands this range of experience, by drawing learners into imaginary landscapes peopled with characters who may have very different lives. Exposing learners to this broader repertoire of experience, may generate new opportunities for dialogical learning amongst adults.

Dialogical learning that draws upon fiction reading or writing can be fostered by adult educators, whether they are working with learners in formal or non-formal contexts. As we see in the examples provided by the two writers in the paper, whether educators are working with prison populations or medical students, fiction can provide an important resource to stimulate learning.

Learners can explore important issues through stories about various social problems and issues, whether the stories are real or imagined. Educators who teach in professional schools, such as medicine, law, or business, may find that using fictional narratives can be an important way to prepare learners to engage with the uncertainty and complexity of their particular fields (Jarvis & Gouthro, 2015). They can also question the type of education that predominates in their professions, such as becoming a medical doctor, and debate whether the focus (such as on pure scientific knowledge) is too constrained for the expectations of the work that they will actually do in their field.

Education is never a neutral process. Those of us who work from a critical stance need to reflect upon the teaching strategies that we bring into our learning spaces. As Stromquist (2014) argues, "the writings of Freire...have been critical to our understanding of the constant political nature of education in everyday life and how education can be used as an effective spaces for political transformation" (p. 547). Ultimately, the stories that we share with one another are a valuable resource to foster critical learning opportunities. Reading and writing fiction are a means for educators to approach their teaching in a more creative way to foster dialogue and enhance the capacities needed for citizens in a democratic society.

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