Space matters: lifelong learning, sexual minorities, and realities of adult education as social education

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In a contemporary change culture of crisis and challenge, lifelong learning should be about learning for all of life; it ought to consider the historical, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, ultimately seeing lifelong learning as educational and cultural work for social transformation. Historically, this ultimate goal has permeated adult education as social education. Still, lifelong learning as critical action and adult education as social education remain enigmatic in many quarters. Within the politics and culture of neoliberalism, such sidelining of the social in learning and education is widespread (Grace 2005, 2007; Jarvis 2007). Within this milieu, in this paper I investigate the space of sexual minorities in forms of lifelong learning and adult education. Recounting a history of ignorance, fear, symbolic violence, silence, and exclusion that have marked sexual-minority experiences in lifelong learning and adult education (Grace 2009; Hill and Grace 2009), I discuss the ongoing fiction of lifelong learning and adult education as forms of globally inclusive social education. I highlight how sexual minorities have engaged in fugitive and often informal kinds of lifelong learning and adult education as part of a counter-pedagogy of resistance seeking respect and accommodation in education and culture. Here I explore the advocacy of Robert J. Hill as a radical and strategic gay adult educator who has worked in a global context to address the right of sexual minorities to learn.

Sexual Minorities and the Construction of a Limited Social

Contemporary lifelong learning and adult education are marked by a construction of a limited social, certainly in relation to sexual minorities who still experience exclusion globally. Indeed particular mainstream educational and other groups, driven by politico-religious and other interests, continue to marginalize or avoid addressing sexual orientation and gender identity in framing learning for life and work. This reality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, queer, and other persons across the spectra of sexual orientations and gender identities is testament to the fiction of lifelong learning as globally inclusive social education. While many mainstream advocates of lifelong learning have made social inclusion and cohesion thematic in their rhetorical framing of its contemporary discourse and practice, they only seem concerned with making neoliberalism look like something more encompassing (Grace 2006, 2007). Their construction of the social is limited, as they frequently marginalize or avoid power relationships, particularly sexual orientation and gender identity, in framing learning for life and work. Even variously critical, feminist, radical, and liberal lifelong educators who link lifelong learning to issues of social learning and social justice tend to be silent on sexual-minority issues. Why would any lifelong educator do this and contribute to lifelong learning as a travesty of social
learning? It may be an oversight tied to heterosexuality privilege, or worse, a deliberate omission linked to heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Or maybe a silent educator views an engagement with sexual-minority issues as risky business that could damage a career. Nevertheless, educator silence speaks to the hegemony of heteronormativity in lifelong-learning discourse and practice. A trek through the literature shows that there has been little focus in contemporary lifelong learning and adult and higher education on sexual orientation, gender identity, and their variations and expressions (Hill and Grace 2009). This is another example of an assault on the social in framing and engaging in lifelong learning in neoliberal times.

Despite this exclusion in mainstream spaces, sexual minorities do engage in learning. In both developed and emerging nations, they have always created spaces within the heteronormative lifeworld (Hill 2003). Production, exchange, and distribution of knowledge of same-sex rituals and traditions, cross-gender role expressions, and non-heteronormative sexualities have historically contributed to a process of subaltern lifelong learning that is actually more common than is often recognized (Grace and Wells 2007; Hill 1995, 2001). In many locations such lifelong learning has been minimized or erased within repressive heteronormative and queer-phobic narratives—both secular and religious—that the purportedly righteous tell one another and use to indoctrinate others. To counter this exclusion in the future, international organizations dedicated to lifelong learning have to engage in vital educational and cultural work for social transformation of sexual minorities. This work has to be learner driven so those on the margins can set the terms of their own self definition to counter the dismissal and defilement that have historically accompanied their disenfranchisement. Such engagement requires inclusive lifelong educators to take up a key role as public intellectuals on the international scene. In this role they can help to establish the conditions that enable sexual-minority learners everywhere to “see themselves” and self-articulate their identities and how they wish to represent themselves. As this cultural work proceeds, those marginalized because of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression will be able to claim a history, a spectral community, and a self that is free to be, become, belong, and act. However, for now, the hegemony of heteronormativity as a hidden yet assumed conceptual framework in lifelong learning and adult education has restricted sexual-minority inclusion in these educational domains. Moreover, it has limited possibilities for social learning in the knowledge-culture-language-power nexus where learners could engage sexual orientation and gender identity as relationships of power (Hill and Grace 2009).

**Robert J. Hill’s Advocacy for Sexual Minorities in a Global Context**

In the dialogic exchange with U.S. adult educator and cultural worker Robert J. (Bob) Hill that follows, a conversation unfolds that explores aspects of his resistances to contest and counter heteronormativity in international adult education. Hill’s resistances offer challenges to lifelong educators to unlearn, rethink, and change as they engage in new knowledge building and praxis that
has a two-fold intention: to interrogate not only how educators understand sexual minorities as lifelong learners, but also how they understand themselves. As an engagement in counter-hegemonic lifelong learning, Hill’s resistances are about reflexivity, social and cultural subversions, engendering change, and transformative learning. These resistances may be small steps in particular moments, but they are important steps politically and pedagogically in the incremental work to make a better world for sexual minorities.

Bob describes his research agenda as multifocal and transdisciplinary, with the unifying feature of using lifelong learning to facilitate positive change and personal and social transformation. Epistemologically, he frames his cultural work using the premise that knowledge is socially constructed. He undertakes this work in national (regional) and international contexts, believing in the value of diversity and promoting social justice in his commitment to make life better for marginalized and oppressed populations. Bob’s research focuses on fully developing the human personality (the right to be, become, belong, and act); enhancing the quality of life; and strengthening fundamental human freedoms. Central in his cultural work within problem-solving contexts is his work with sexual minorities. As a gay man and critical lifelong educator, Bob situates learning as a sociocultural experience, and he views social interaction as a primary means through which learning occurs. Moreover, he believes that learning fundamentally involves association with, and within, a community of theory, practice, and identity in which activities are often significantly more important than knowledge and skills in the learning process.

This view of learning contests and confronts lifelong learning that excludes sexual minorities. It was evident in a critical incident that Bob experienced during the Sixth World Assembly of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), which was held in 2001 in Ocho Rios, Jamaica. While this World Assembly had a focus on global citizenship, gender justice, and understanding the hierarchy of gender relations and the construction of gender identities, it is clear that Bob’s experience of intolerance and discrimination indicated that the ICAE still has much work to do to address pervasive homophobia and unaddressed sexuality and gender issues in its midst (Hill 2001). As an adult educator who is also a visible gay activist, Bob was told by a World Assembly leader that his safety could not be guaranteed since his public stance supporting sexual-minority rights put him in direct jeopardy. Part of the controversy focused on an act of resistance whereby Bob had added gay themes and the phrase “Difference is a fundamental human right!” to an artistic mural. Bob’s resistance and the concomitant threat to his safety became a critical incident, providing ICAE participants at a workshop on global citizenship and gender justice an opportunity to raise the issue of organizational intolerance of same-sex orientation. Workshop participants recognized that the right to be different is a human right, and they agreed to propose the inclusion of this phrase in the final declaration of the World Assembly. They articulated that in future World Assemblies of the
ICAE, the security of everyone facing discrimination and intolerance must be guaranteed.

This was a pivotal moment in the ICAE’s history. Until the Sixth World Assembly of the ICAE—where sexual orientation or personal preferences were recognized for the first time in the World Assembly’s final declaration—silence about sexual minorities was a cultural reality in the international adult-education community. While using the term *personal preferences* is problematic for sexual minorities, it nevertheless had import; by including the term with sexual orientation, gender non-conformity is also guaranteed equal rights. As Bob noted, this is because the term personal preferences draws attention to the fact that many trans-identified individuals, whether homosexual or heterosexual, are targets for discrimination based on how they dress, look, and behave—for example, gender-crossing clothing, use of body ornamentation, use of cosmetics, and effeminacy in males or masculinity in females. By including personal preferences, Bob concluded that the World Assembly had expressed sensitivity to the diverse array of culturally constructed sexual-minority identities and differences around the world. Most importantly though, the upshot of this World Assembly outcome is a universal positioning of the fundamental human right to be different.

*An Exchange with Robert J. Hill*

*APG:* Given the continuing persecution of sexual minorities around the world, is the international community working in lifelong learning and adult education responding to this persecution?

*RJH:* Let me speak to two examples: CONFINTEA V, the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education held in Hamburg, Germany in 1997; and the CONFINTEA V Mid-term Review, held in Bangkok, Thailand in 2003.

At the invitation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), more than 1,500 representatives of governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attended CONFINTEA V. Conference participants spoke of shattering an institutional learning monopoly by recognizing that nonformal and informal education have vital roles to play together with formal education taking place in schools, colleges, and universities. This was significant for sexual-minority communities where much informal and nonformal adult education occurs, even though it goes unrecognized and unrepresented in much adult education (Hill 1995; Hill and Grace 2009). CONFINTEA V participants developed various themes focused on critical citizenship, holistic living, and diverse learners that have direct relevance to sexual minorities as global citizens. Yet more than a decade later, most government policymakers as well as educators working in lifelong learning and adult education have not interpreted and applied any of these themes in a consideration of the rights and needs of sexual minorities. For example, regarding critical citizenship, sexual minorities clearly fall into the rank of second-class citizens in most countries of the world. All too often, sexual-minority individuals and communities are denied
full and equal rights, justice and equality, freewill, and the right to organize. In many jurisdictions, we are also denied opportunities to participate in civil society and open economic development in formal and informal economies. This composite exclusion deeply impacts the wellbeing and public and personal health of sexual-minority citizens who are disenfranchised from the kinds of access and accommodation that go hand in hand with the rights and privileges of full citizenship in democratic cultures and societies.

In Hamburg there was a call for governments to adapt to the realities of a host of marginalized peoples. Civil society, too, was challenged to help individuals express their aspirations and create learning opportunities throughout life. However, sexual minorities were NOT included in the mix. There was no envisioning of our dreams to experience justice and live full lives. While CONFINTEA V adopted the perspective of learning throughout life, it failed to live out any notion of lifelong learning for all as sexual minorities were once again denied presence and place within the four pillars of lifelong learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together (Delors 1996). Moreover, CONFINTEA V, which was billed as an international adult-education conference that would focus on learning to aid the development and survival of citizens, also demonstrated the inadequacy of international adult education as a forum for advancing the human and civil rights of sexual minorities. Despite the rhetoric about the right to learn, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, and queer people essentially went unnoticed at the conference.

APG: You’ve presented a bleak picture that suggests lifelong learning is not for all. Is there any hope of a better world for sexual minorities?

RJH: What happened at the CONFINTEA V Mid-term Review was encouraging. For the first time, activist adult educators challenged the reality of no space and place for sexual minorities as participants carried out a mid-term evaluation of the CONFINTEA V agenda. One significant thematic review within the overall mid-term review focused on democracy. Dr. Lean Chan Heng, University of Science, Penang, Malaysia chaired the session, and I was the rapporteur. As a queer activist/scholar I arrived in Bangkok with a stated agenda, which I also brought to the Democracy Thematic Review. My goals were to expand the parameters of lifelong learning and adult education by: 1) using education for citizenship and education for civil and human rights as anti-oppression tools to build knowledge, skills, resources, and capacity in human-rights advocacy based on sexual orientation and gender identity; 2) discussing language and broadening the definition of discrimination so that grounds for protection against prejudice in workplace and other sociocultural settings included sexual orientation and gender identity; 3) engaging in public pedagogy to cast members of sexual minorities as persons and citizens who are NOT sick, criminal, or sinful, and 4) engaging in public pedagogy to draw attention to sexual-minority human rights and any violations—social oppression, torture, arbitrary arrest, and extortion are commonplace—across governments and civil society.
After several days of formal and informal meetings, caucuses, and networking on sexual-minority justice, both the Democracy Thematic Review and the Gender Thematic Review took up the language of sexual-minority inclusion in lifelong learning and adult education. One of the regional reviews, largely under the leadership of Latin American women at the conference, acted similarly. The Democracy workgroup issued the following statement, "[We recommend] promoting human-centered values such as peace, human rights, solidarity and justice, [and the elimination of] discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity" (CONFINTEA V 2003, n.p.). This position was carried into the all-conference discussions. In the end, the Mid-term Review efforts resulted in thirty-eight recommendations. Recommendation 7 called for UNESCO member states, Civil Society Organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations, and others to include sexual minorities in all lifelong-learning efforts; it also called for equal rights for sexual minorities.

Point 7 was the ONLY controversial agenda item at the final session during the ratification of the recommendations. A government Minister and representative from Uganda objected to the language, stating that it would require the Government of Uganda to implement policies contrary to state laws where homosexuality is prohibited. Sadly, Uganda does not stand alone. Globally, over 70 countries have a complete ban on homosexuality, with sentences upon conviction ranging from imprisonment to public flogging and death. In at least 7 nations, same-sex relations are punishable by execution. Chechnya, Iran, Iraq, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen implement capital punishment for homosexuality. Same-sex relations are unsympathetically handled in Bangladesh, Egypt, Malaysia, and Pakistan; in these jurisdictions maximum jail sentences range from 3 to 20 years.

In response to Uganda’s position, I argued that in light of CONFINTEA V’s focus on the rights of all, the erasure of language to abet sexual-minority inclusion would constitute an act of violence and injustice by members of the Mid-term Review. I requested that the Chair not eliminate this point, in the name of human rights and social justice. After these brief but contentious petitions to the Chair, a recess was called. During the break, with the assistance of Alan Tuckett from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education in the United Kingdom, the language issue was resolved. In the end, the controversial wording of Point 7 was retained, with the parenthetical phrase where licit.

During the CONFINTEA V Mid-term Review it became apparent, once again, that views on “homosexuality” flew in the face of some religious traditions, cultures, and governments, especially in Christian and Muslim countries in Africa, the Middle East, and, to some extent, Asia. In an interesting twist, some people claimed that to promote “gay rights” was a form of neo-colonialism caught up in a dominating Western ideology. In the end, two questions worthy of reflection remain: Were activist educators and cultural workers, who sought equal rights for
all sexual-minority people at the mid-term review, contributing to globalization by imposing their will on "less powerful" nations? Or was the neo-colonialist argument a subtly homophobic manoeuvre to sideline concerns with social justice for sexual minorities?

Concluding Perspective
Much of the educational and cultural work for social justice and transformation of the plight of sexual minorities globally has taken place in local sites outside international organizations as well as outside mainstream lifelong learning and adult education (Hill and Grace 2009). In their institutionalized and systematized forms, these two educational formations have either tended to erase sexual minorities from their social discourses through silence and inaction or they have reacted in a homophobic manner whenever sexual minorities have transgressed their exclusionary spaces and contravened their traditional prescriptions of who has place (Hill and Grace 2009). Transgression of heteronormative educational space is requisite if the notion of lifelong learning for all is to have true rather than rhetorical meaning and value. As inclusive educators emphasizing social transformation, we must challenge any kind of education or learning that leaves minorities out. In the case of sexual minorities, educators focused on our inclusion have to continue to interrogate the heteronormative culture-knowledge-language-power nexus and advocate for our human and civil rights. This requires that they work within a pedagogy of place as they bring aspects of criticality—ethics and the political ideals of modernity: democracy, freedom, and social justice—to bear on lifelong learning as critical action that recognizes, respects, and accommodates sexual minorities in policymaking, policy implementation, and practice (Grace 2006). Here the goal is to make both heterocentric and subaltern queer knowledges public in the work to achieve safety and security as well as space and place for sexual minorities who occupy a spectral community of queer others (Hill and Grace 2009).

References


