POINT-COUNTERPOINT

Funneling Toward Authenticity:
A Response to "Intimacy and Ethical behavior in Adult Education"

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> *…we have in part been constituted by these [social] constructions, but that as they are [italics in original] constructions, they can be thrown off and a world that is more honoring and more accepting, more equitable and more loving can be achieved. (Gunter, 1996, p. 59)*

In his article, "Intimacy and Ethical Action in Adult Education," Donovan Plumb (2009) suggests a pathway for adult educators to achieve the type of world that Gunter (1996) envisions. Plumb argues that the personal qualities that enable us to have fulfilling (sexually) intimate relationships are also those that enable ethical action on the part of adult educators. On the one hand, his choice of strategy (sexual intimacy) for creating a more honoring, accepting, equitable, and loving learning experience is intriguing because it shocks readers (presumably mostly other adult educators, such as myself) out of our comfort zones of what is considered "acceptable" to discuss as educators of adults and as members of organizations. Yet, on the other hand, Plumb (implicitly) reinforces some of the very social constructions he seeks to throw off. In this response, I will explore these two aspects of Plumb's work and suggest an alternative framing of intimacy and ethical action for adult educators.

Confronting the Comfortably Numb

Mestrović (1997) contends that our soundbyte society has created a culture of automatons who numbly proceed through life with a veneer of manufactured displays of civility. Plumb confronts the comfortably numb in at least two ways with the present article. The topic he selected and the language he uses both have the effect of causing readers to take pause.

By describing sexual intimacy as a major vehicle to achieve ethical behavior as an adult educator, Plumb challenges our notions of what is thinkable, much less discussable, in academic spaces. It often takes a jolt of something different, something shocking, to move people to consider alternative perspectives (Sandlin & Callahan, 2009). Topics that are likely to generate strongly emotional responses encourage students to reflect and, in turn, engage. This type of challenge can create the type of atmosphere in which more open dialogue can occur (Gunter, 1996). By modeling open and respectful dialogue, educators can set the stage for more equal—or, as Plumb calls it, mutually interdependent—interactions amongst students.

This leveling also occurs within the structure of the article itself. Plumb challenges the readers' expectations of distance and formality in scholarly literature by using first names when

he refers to other works. Thus, he creates a more intimate connection with a scholarly community of practice. This challenge has the power to encourage reflection upon how private spaces (whether sexual or not) influence public action. In other words, confronting challenging topics that cause us to reflect upon self may change the way we behave in interactions with others. Despite the power presented by the use of sexual intimacy, I challenge whether the personal qualities of trust, tolerance, and other-directedness that Plumb argues are the foundation of ethical behavior in the classroom are necessarily or particularly learned through *sexual* intimacy.

Power and Maturity

The use of sexual intimacy as the vehicle through which ethical behavior can be learned by adult educators presents several challenges. Plumb uses Kernberg's psychoanalytic work that explains gendered identity as socially constructed as the foundation for understanding the nature of sexual intimacy. This is problematic on at least two accounts.

First, he describes the development of sexual intimacy through the lens of relationships between men and women. Coupled with the opening story about Friere's discomfort at having another man hold his hand, this representation of sexual intimacy privileges heterosexual relationships. Although the story about Freire captures attention, it draws attention to homophobic tendencies "at the expense of thinking about the possibility for intimacy in all but the narrowest sense" (Rumens, 2008, p. 15). While Plumb acknowledges the heteronormative orientation of Kernberg's (and, by extension, his own) account of sexual intimacy, this is done in a passingly brief parenthetical note.

Second, Plumb's description, based on Kernberg, of the development of gendered intimacy development reinforces gendered power differentials. While Plumb acknowledges that his descriptions of gender development are dichotomizing, by not directly confronting the power implications inherent in his description, he is (implicitly) accepting the normalcy of gendered roles without exploring the ways in which power is associated with enacting those roles. And, yet, sexuality and socially constructed gender identities are fraught with power implications (Fleming, 2007). Plumb frames these unequal relationships as made more equal through mutual interdependence, all the while not confronting the power that necessarily remains within such sexual relationships that he is equating to relationships between teachers and learners. Within the context of adult education, feminist scholars advocate the acknowledgment and *use* of power wisely (see for example, hooks, 1989). Gunter (1996) contended that "teachers necessarily have power" (p. 57). Indeed, in earlier works, I have suggested that to deny that teachers have power is to abdicate responsibility (Callahan, 2004).

Another challenge of the use of sexual intimacy as the foundation for ethical behavior is that Plumb seems to confound sexual intimacy with maturity. This is particularly apparent in the use of Erikson's theory of human psychosexual development. Referred to as the "Eight Ages of Man" (Erikson, 1950), Erikson's theory proposes a series of stages through which individuals progress. Simplistically, the adult stages include identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity. What is important to note here is that generativity is distinct from intimacy, which occurs in young adulthood. Generativity is the aftermath of having negotiated both identity (an

understanding of self) and intimacy (an understanding of self in relation to close personal others) (Bradley & Marcia, 1998). Generativity is about giving back, about creating a legacy (Slater, 2003); it is not about forming sexually-based bonds of mutual interdependence which, for Erikson, occur at a different, and earlier, life-stage.

What If…

We were to use *intimacy* in general, as opposed to *sexual intimacy*, to serve as a lens for ethical behavior amongst adult educators?

Plumb contends that ethical action is based in trust, tolerance, and other-directedness that is found in sexual intimacy. What about the intimacy between a parent and child? Or lifelong best friends? While the notion of *sexual* intimacy is certainly provocative, these characteristics that Plumb claims to be the source of ethical behavior are likely to be learned in a variety of other types of intimate relationships besides sexually intimate relationships. The focus on *sexual* intimacy unnecessarily narrows and dichotomizes the very relationships Plumb claims to hope to build. As Kerfoot and Knights (1998) note, an emphasis on sexuality risks instrumentalizing relationships because of the power differentials associated with sex.

I contend that the *ethical action* Plumb is calling for may be better constructed using a lens of authenticity of self that can be found through intimacy in general. The vulnerability and openness that Plumb hopes will be revealed through sexual intimacy may be equally found through a general conception of intimacy, which "frequently involves the unplanned experience of 'letting go', whereby the self is exposed and rendered vulnerable" (Rumens, 2008, p. 21).

Although he frames it differently, what Plumb is essentially trying to do is to call for a more genuine self-reflection within an artificially other-directed society. This self-reflection is molded by psychoanalysis toward acceptance and enactment of intimacy that leads to authenticity of self and, subsequently, ethical action (see Figure 1). This connection to the therapeutic is an acknowledged area of contention for adult educators (Yorks & Kasl, 2006). On the one hand, adult educators recognize that their ability to connect and engage with learners depends on deep self-reflection and awareness; on the other hand, adult educators tend to avoid such work in an effort to maintain "a clear distinction between education and therapy" (Yorks & Kasl, 2006, p. 46).

The work on authenticity in teaching is a growing area of research amongst (adult) educators, and Plumb's work reflects similar constructs of interest. Trustworthiness, openness, vulnerability, caring for others, risk taking, and contextualized self-awareness are but a few of the characteristics associated with authenticity in teaching (Kreber, Klampfleitner, McCune, Bayne, & Knottenbelt, 2007). The literature on authenticity further links these characteristics to adult educators' moral (and ethical) behavior.
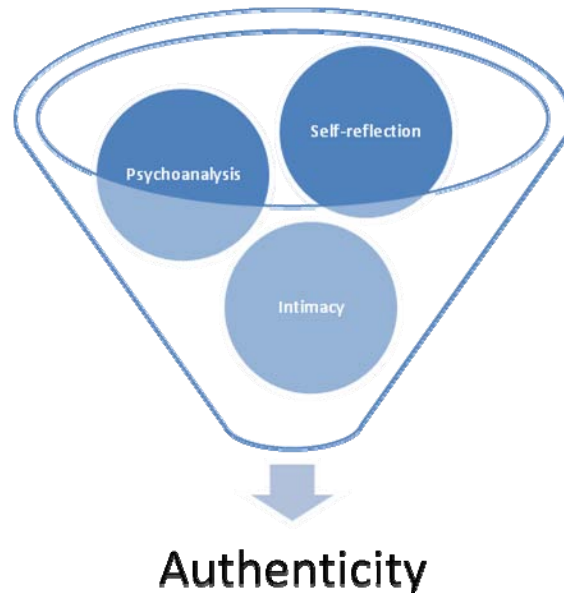
Figure 1. Funneling toward authenticity.

Nevertheless, Plumb's work offers two distinct dimensions from the work on authenticity. First, as already discussed, he focuses on a more specific dimension of intimacy (sexual intimacy) as the means to achieve these characteristics that lead to ethical behavior. Second, he advocates psychoanalysis as the means to help adult educators enact these characteristics in the classroom. What I hope for is a more rigorous exploration and explanation of how intimacy (particularly in its broader conception) and psychoanalysis can contribute more fully to our understanding of *authenticity* as it relates to ethical behavior by adult educators.

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