Postmodernism, which has been characterized as an outgrowth of or reaction to modernism, is more a form of questioning and a perspective than a theory or set of ideas. Although postmodernism resists definition, the following appear to be among its generally agreed-upon characteristics: questioning of all claims to absolute, universal truth; rejection of attempts to provide encompassing explanations; identity that is fluid, changeable, and derived from multiple discourses; loss of confidence in progress, rationality, science, and "objective" reality; recognition that perception is interpretive and inseparable from individual frameworks; and a view of power as a process that enables/restricts or promotes/discourages forms of practice or thought. The issue of whether adult education is embedded in modernism or postmodernism has been widely debated. Adult educators have been urged to engage with the issues raised by postmodern accounts of culture in the following ways: question how social relations are organized and what social visions are desirable; recognize their own and others' contexts, beliefs, and frameworks; focus on understanding power structures and foster development of alternative forms of knowledge; and consider themselves cultural workers rather than technicians engaged in maximizing efficiency. (Contains a 22-item annotated bibliography.)
Postmodernism and Adult Education
Trends and Issues Alerts

Sandra Kerka

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH  43210-1090
Postmodernism and Adult Education

Postmodernism is a term that is widely used in many fields, such as literature, art, architecture, history, and philosophy. By definition, postmodernism resists definition. However, some characteristics that are generally agreed upon are presented here with the understanding that this is a partial, working definition. Postmodernism is not a theory or set of ideas as much as it is a form of questioning, an attitude, or perspective. Seen as either an outgrowth of or a reaction to modernism, postmodernism may be characterized as follows (Bagnall 1995; McLean 1996; Rhodes 1996; Stanage 1995; Westwood 1991):

- Questioning of all claims to absolute, universal truth
- Rejection of "grand narratives" that attempt to provide encompassing explanations (including capitalism, Marxism, Christianity, science)
- Identity that is fluid, changeable, and derived from multiple discourses
- Loss of confidence in progress, rationality, science, and "objective" reality
- Recognition that perception is interpretive and inseparable from our frameworks, including language
- Knowledge that is contingent, contextual, and linked to power
- Value that is not intrinsic but is determined by choice, negotiation, manipulation, or domination depending on how power is used and by whom
- A view of power as a process that enables or restricts, promotes or discourages forms of practice or thought

To some, adult education is firmly embedded in modernism. Much of its research is grounded in technical, rational, scientific methods and the notion of self-directed learning assumes that individuals have autonomy, which postmodernism denies (Stanage 1996). Even emancipatory adult education can be viewed as another of the suspect "grand narratives" (Pietykowski 1996). To others, adult education collaborates in what Briton (1996b) calls a postmodernism of reaction, which uses the rejection of absolutes to "free" the market of all social obligation, "liberate" individuals of their collective responsibility, subjugate social justice to "individual free will" (Briton 1996a, p. 29). This perspective justifies globalization, reengineering, pursuit of profitability, and development of "human capital" (Garrick 1994). Opposing this is a postmodernism of resistance, which takes a critical stance toward the status quo and resists the regulation of identity, which is a new and more subtle form of oppression (Briton 1996b).

Adult educators are urged to engage with the issues raised by postmodern accounts of culture in the following ways (Bagnall 1995; Briton 1996b; Edwards and Usher 1995; Pietrykowski 1996; Westwood 1991): question how social relations are organized and what social visions are desirable; consider how "the adult" is constructed in adult education discourse; recognize the contexts, beliefs, and frameworks of themselves and others; focus on understanding power structures and foster the development of alternative forms of knowledge; and consider themselves cultural workers, not technicians engaged in maximizing efficiency.

Print Resources


Tenets of postmodernism are the interpretive nature of perception and the cultural contingency of belief. Postmodernist adult education would be contextualized, indeterminate, expressive, participative, heterodox, and critical.


The modernist search for timeless universal principles of practice must be replaced by postmodernist striving for situational subjectivity, based on critical self-awareness and tolerance of others' beliefs.


Neoliberal marketplace rhetoric commodifies knowledge, learning, and culture for economic ends. The liberal-humanist tradition of adult and higher education is threatened by the consumerist mentality.

Campbell, P. "Pedagogical Implications of Postmodernism in Adult Literacy." 1993.

Highlights the implications of three characteristics of postmodernism for adult literacy practice: discourse, representation, and difference.


Includes "Post Modernity and Continuing Education: Becoming Critical Learners" (B. Down); "The Post-Modern Condition: Reformulating Adult Education Pedagogy" (M. Tennant); and "Traditional Modernity, Postmodernity and Communicative Modernity" (R. Flecha).

Suggests that the push to make educational programs more accountable (i.e., profitable) diminishes social accountability goals.


"New right" governments may support experiential learning because of its role in developing self-disciplined and law-abiding citizens and consumers. Adult educators and trainers must understand and engage in debates about experiential learning and postmodernism to understand their own practices.


In modernism, "useful" knowledge is emancipatory; in postmodernism, knowledge is exchanged on the basis of its value to the consumer. Its real value is tied to increasing the efficiency of the distribution system.


Adult educators need to recognize the significance of partial perspectives rather than embracing all-encompassing, universal narratives.


Postmodern theory applied to training can lead to questioning how knowledge and values are determined in corporate contexts and how training contributes to corporate goals.


Argues that education and training reproduce the values of their cultural setting and that these cultural values are relative and changing.


Makes a case for using postmodern concepts in the reflection stage of action research.


Postmodern shifts in the view of subjectivity and language may not necessarily signal the end of moral reasoning. Instead, a reorientation to the well-being of others becomes the basis for ethical reasoning.


Postmodernism shifts oppression from overt forms of domination to subtle processes of self-regulation. Adult educators interested in social action must understand the new forms of power.


Examines contributions of postmodern social/cultural theories to adult education, concluding that adult educators should be aware of the connection between knowledge and power; individuals occupy multiple positions through which they construct a worldview; and adult educators should be aware of how power is deployed.

Randell, S. "Adult Education, Postmodernity and a Future!" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Dallas, TX, November 1993. (ED 366 756)

Postmodernism influences the reinvention of organizations, careers, and the self. Adult education can provide the information and skills with which to understand the world, construct meaning, and create and recreate identity.


A postmodern perspective in human resource development can either reinforce existing power structures or can recognize differences, develop alternative forms of knowledge, and create opportunities for all to have a voice.


Explains the distinction between postmodern adult education, adult education in a postmodern world, and a postmodern definition of adult education. In postmodern adult education, learning is a process of fusing existing meanings with new possibilities.


The postmodern lifeworld in which claims to absolute, universal value and truth are called into question is being exploited by corporatism. Human resource development is complicit in the "learning for earning" mentality.


Engaging with postmodern accounts of culture can help adult educators consider how "the adult" is constructed and positioned and how learning and the learner are viewed in adult education discourse.

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