

THE CHALLENGE OF ACCESS: CONFRONTING THE GATEKEEPERS OF KNOWLEDGE

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I come to this topic as an adult educator. I feel it is important to make this point in order to locate my approach to access within a field of education that has "... *the radically democratic development of knowledge at its heart*" (Barr, 1999–71). Within this approach promoting access to education across all sectors of the population is of fundamental importance. The democratic development of knowledge includes, but goes beyond, a concern to accommodate a more diverse student body within educational institutions. It also implies providing opportunities to actively participate in creating the knowledge that is disseminated through these institutions.

The task of democratising knowledge calls for a critique of how knowledge is currently created and disseminated, who is included and who is excluded from these processes, and the extent to which current approaches to access are serving to promote access to these processes.

This paper distinguishes between approaches to access that focus exclusively on democratising learning opportunities and those that promote democratisation of the processes of knowledge creation. In doing so the paper explores the relationships between the providers of formal education and previously excluded sectors of the population who are increasingly being viewed as potential constituents. It determines the extent to which these new constituents are positioned as consumers of a pre-packaged educational product, or as co-creators of a new knowledge base. It argues that the dominant liberal approaches to broadening access to educational services are primarily system-driven rather than learner-driven and in effect serve to consolidate existing elitist and exclusionary practices in the processes of knowledge creation. The paper calls for a more comprehensive and radical approach to access that will challenge these practices by addressing the causes as well as the manifestations of educational exclusion.

Education as a Force for Exclusion

The concern to democratise knowledge is taking place against a backdrop of globalisation. Over the past twenty years globalisation has contributed to a move towards an 'economy-centred' purpose across the field of education. Korsgaard (1997: 18) attributes this emphasis to the growing influence of the OECD's philosophy which "... is based on a neo-liberal way of thinking regarding education as an investment in human capital and human resource development". Within this context significant numbers of individuals and communities have found themselves poorly served by

education, whether due to their geographic location, or their social, ethnic or cultural status. Their experience of exclusion from education has repercussions in all areas of their lives. They are effectively disconnected from the forces that determine the dominant economic, cultural and political realities across the world. What distinguishes these individuals and communities, therefore, is their experience of exclusion as a dynamic process that marginalises them from a cumulative range of decisions that impact on their lives.

There is ample evidence that the current provision of formal education serves to consolidate the exclusion of the least advantaged of the world's population either by denying them access or by reinforcing class and gender based differences among those who gain access. Consequently their potential to contribute to the creation of knowledge is severely curtailed.

Although the statistics are far less bleak in economically better-off countries than they are in poor countries, similar patterns of educational exclusion are evident across the world. It is children from the most disadvantaged areas, or those who belong to the most disadvantaged sectors of the population, who are most likely to drop out, or be pushed out, of formal education. In a review of education policy in Ireland, Clancy (1999: 91) makes the point that the social class background of parents is directly related to early school leaving and that among those who complete second level schooling "...the levels of attainment are strongly related to social background, with higher levels of attainment for those from higher socio-economic groups". The link between socio-economic status and retention and performance rates are apparent across all OECD countries. Even where there is an increase in the numbers of participants from lower socio-economic groups the gap in relative retention and achievement rates is not closing. A recent OECD study indicates that "...increased overall rates of participation of young adults does not necessarily mean that students from previously under-represented groups have increased their share" (Wagner, 1999:4).

One has to conclude that while academic ability may appear to be the decisive factor that determines one's likelihood of participation in education, this ability is decidedly class specific. It is also gender specific in the case of certain subject areas. In any consideration of education it is clear that specific sectors of the population have been relegated to the status of outsider or bystander. The exclusion or nominal involvement of these sectors has a negative impact not only on those who are excluded, but also on an education system that consequently lacks exposure to diversity in approaches to problem solving and ways of thinking.

Creating Knowledge through Solidarity

Santos (1999) provides useful insights into the challenge of defining, creating and

applying purposeful knowledge. He calls for a postmodernist critical theory that is characterised by a responsiveness to the multiplicity of oppressions that exist thereby making the "different struggles mutually intelligible" (p. 34) and making resistance to what he calls "the hybrid concept of globalisation" (p. 35) possible and realisable; a critical theory that allows for the creation of a vision that is unashamedly aspirational; in transcending the limitations of what currently exists; and is sustainable only in so far as it continues to be the product of dynamic networking among the many agents of resistance and change.

Santos distinguishes between two forms of knowledge creation that he terms "... knowledge-as-regulation, whose point of ignorance is called chaos and whose point of knowledge is called order, and knowledge-as-emancipation, whose point of ignorance is called colonialism and whose point of knowledge is called solidarity" (Santos, 1999: 36). He uses the term 'colonialism' to encapsulate the narrow base whereby knowledge is controlled by an elite, all outside that base are relegated to a not-knowing position, and the differences or otherness of those who are outside are seen as problems to be overcome. Solidarity, on the other hand, refers to the end point of a dynamic process that perceives difference not as a problem but as the prime site for creating new and purposeful knowledge.

Knowledge-as-emancipation, therefore, not only calls for a recognition of 'others' as knowing subjects but also calls for processes that enable meaningful engagement with those who have been silenced and objectified. Silence, Santos (1999: 39) claims, is "... a construction that asserts itself as the symptom of a blockade", a blockade which he says, results from the imposition of what were presented as "... universal values authorised by reason" but were in fact, reason as defined by the dominant race, sex and social class. For those outside these elite groupings the resulting "... destruction provoked silences that rendered unpronounceable the needs and aspirations of the peoples and social groups whose forms of knowledge were subjected to destruction" (Santos, 1999: 39).

The need for meaningful engagement with those who have been excluded from creating knowledge is echoed in the epistemological concerns of radical adult education. The emphasis on creating a participative learning environment is an acknowledgement that those who have in the past been relegated to the position of 'not knowing', have in effect been silenced. Coming to terms with the forces that submerged their needs and aspirations enables those who have been excluded to reassert themselves as 'knowing' and to build on that knowledge.

The challenge for programmes that promote access to formal education is to create a similar learning environment. Otherwise those who enter mainstream education from groups who were formerly excluded, will simply be afforded opportunities to 'consume' knowledge created within the old paradigm of knowledge-as-regulation. In

such a setting these new learners will be enabled merely to conform to the existing system by abandoning their 'otherness' and resuming their silence.

Responses to Exclusion

Third level institutions are attempting to broaden their on-campus student base by enabling access to a more diverse range of students than heretofore. This expansion is undoubtedly driven by a complex range of forces including financial considerations, demands for greater equity, changing demographics, a desire to respond to new demands from pressure groups including industry, the availability of funding supports for initiatives that promote greater access, and a commitment to a vision of education that is participatory and democratic. Whether these initiatives respond to the diversity of perspective and ways of thinking resulting from broadening the learner base, or merely offer opportunities for larger numbers of learners to participate in a fundamentally unchanged and essentially elitist system, is largely dependent on the extent to which these moves are driven by a liberal or radical vision of education and knowledge.

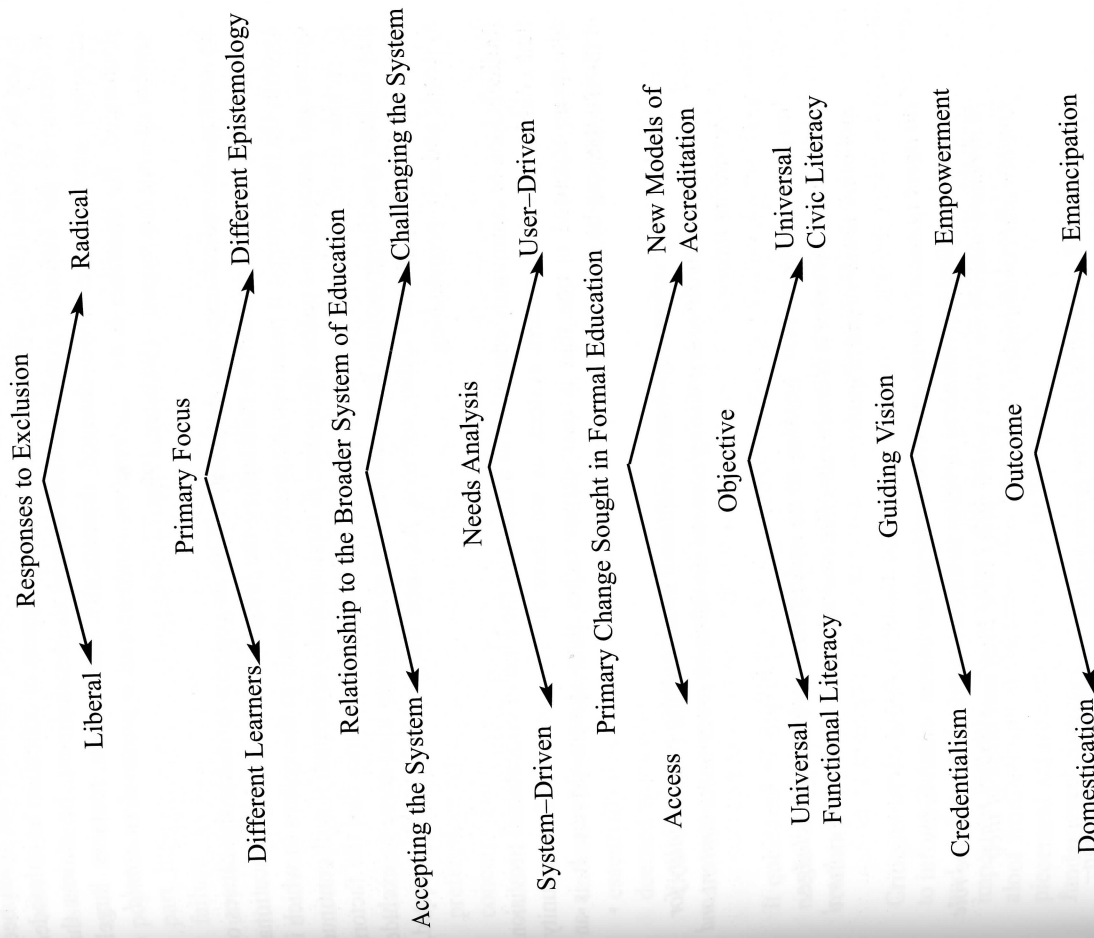
The figure 1 depicts the distinguishing characteristics of liberal and radical responses to the challenge of exclusion.

A key difference within both responses relates to how the problem of exclusion is defined. The liberal response assumes that exclusion results from a set of unfortunate circumstances occurring haphazardly, circumstances that can be compensated for by directing additional resources to support individuals who are judged on a case by case basis to be deserving and most likely to benefit. The system of education is seen as a largely benign force reflecting what Santos termed "universal values authorised by reason". Rather than challenge these values the liberal approach aims to expand and modify the existing systems to accommodate greater numbers from different sectors of the population.

A liberal response according to Lynch (1999: 309), will at best "bring limited gain for the relatively advantaged among the disadvantaged". She points out that:

"... the internal logic of liberal policies ... treats education as an autonomous site with an ability to promote equality internally irrespective of external forces. By ignoring economic and power inequalities outside of education in particular, it endorses social and economic systems which perpetuate inequality within education. In a global context of structured inequality, the promise of liberal equal opportunities policies is realisable therefore for only a small minority of relatively advantaged people within a given disadvantaged group" (Lynch, 1999: 309).

Figure 1



A further distinguishing characteristic of the liberal approach is an unquestioning belief in the conventional formal system as the most desirable medium to deliver education. As far back as the 1970s, Illich (1971) questioned the capacity of conventional schooling to provide worthwhile education. More recently this issue has again been raised by Webster (1996), who describes the formal system of education as outmoded. Referring to the historical conditions that shaped its development, he claims that although circumstances have changed dramatically, the system remains largely unchanged. He describes it as "...a modern institution in a postmodern world... a symbol of what has passed" (Webster, 1996: 72-73).

By contrast the radical response, distinguished by its concern to tackle the causes of exclusion, has no commitment to maintaining the integrity of the current educational system. On the contrary, it perceives the problem as endemic to the system in which it occurs and assumes that unless the system is fundamentally reformed, it will continue to exclude in ways that are eminently predictable. It further assumes that the factors that exclude specific groupings from participation in education also serve to exclude those same groupings from other services. As such the problem is deep rooted, systemic and self-perpetuating.

Radicals look to community education as a model of the kind of educational provision that could replace the current system, as we know it. The concept of community education espoused is one that is user-driven rather than system-driven. It is an approach that can be described as:

"being firmly community-based, with local groups taking responsibility for playing a key role in organising courses, deciding on programme content and recruiting tutors;

an empowering process, working as an equal partner with the knowledge, skills and experience a learner can offer, and taking account of the cultural and other needs of participants;

an agent of social change and community advancement, which helps communities and individuals to develop strategies to take a more active role in decision-making on issues which affect their lives and those of their families and communities;

a process built on models of active participation, and inclusive decision-making" (Department of Education and Science, 1998: 89).

While the community education described above generally targets adult learners, the age of the learner is of less significance than the shift in emphasis away from the needs of the system and towards the needs of the learner.

Differences between liberal and radical approaches are particularly evident in on-campus access initiatives for those described variously as 'mature' students, students with 'special needs', 'older' learners, and 'non-traditional' students. A liberal response tends to emphasise the 'otherness' and 'outsider' status of these students. Their 'otherness' is defined in terms of how they process information, or respond to established teaching and examining procedures, and the specific supports they need such as childcare or wheelchair ramps. The under-representation of sectors of the population is seen as due to factors such as a lack of motivation to participate on their part, little encouragement from peer group and family, financial constraints, and fear of failure. As such the causes are located in the lifestyles of the learners. The inability or unwillingness of the system to serve the educational needs of these learners is afforded little attention. Access initiatives that focus exclusively on supporting the individual student to cope with the demands of the institution implies benevolent and ideological neutrality on the part of a system that accommodates them as exceptional cases.

Rather than locate the problem among those who are under-represented, a radical approach recognises the institution as exercising social, cultural, economic and gender preferences reflected in its selection and assessment procedures. A radical approach is concerned to reveal whose 'reason' is being presented under the guise of the 'universal values' that:

- underpin formal education
- essentially determine what constitutes the typical learner and what knowledge is deemed worthwhile
- dictate the purposes of learning and how it is measured
- are replicated throughout the entire educational system from pre-school onwards.

It questions the appropriateness of current service delivery modalities in meeting the needs of a diverse student body and it questions whose needs are being served by retaining existing boundaries between disciplines and between providers.

Critiques of the broader educational system that raise all of these questions, have served to inform the provision of appropriate pre entry courses and support services to learners and staff to make access for a broader range of learners possible. While these are important interventions and ones that need to be attended to, the tendency to remain aloof from critiquing the knowledge base of the entire education system, has allowed piecemeal adjustments to be made to the system, often enabling it to flourish without fundamental change.

Radical Adult Education theorists and practitioners concerned with these realities are faced with the challenge of defining the principles that inform their analysis of the context in which access initiatives are taking place and in so doing to challenge institutions to acknowledge that the values embedded in previous practices that excluded these learners, and in current liberal practices that seek to include them, constitute an unchanged elitist stance.

Redefining Solidarity

Radical changes across the educational system require forums where all of the stakeholders, particularly those who are not well served at present, can voice their dissatisfaction and play an active part in refashioning the provision of educational services and the allocation of resources within the services, so that diversity can be nurtured as a source of strength. Forums of this nature are needed at the levels of policy-making and co-ordination of provision as well as at the level of implementation.

There is a growing demand among those addressing problems associated with exclusion for formal education to provide a forum to explore and disseminate the lessons they have learned. The opportunities and constraints that impact on the establishment of relationships between these activists and formal educational systems have much to do with the fundamental differences in philosophical positionings of both and in the 'kinds of knowledge' valued by both parties.

This is particularly evident in the demands for inclusion coming from women's community groups. For many years these groups have engaged in educational activities that have experimented with collaborative and mutually supportive ways of learning. They have also heightened their awareness of how educational policies and practices perpetuate exclusion. These groups are searching for progression routes within the broader education system that validate their learning to date and that allow them to continue to learn in participative, collaborative ways. They particularly want access to universities because they recognise that university qualifications are valuable currency in the labour market. However, they want more than mere access to the existing system. They want opportunities to participate in radically reshaping the system so that it can respond to their preferred way of learning and in so doing, acknowledge these as valid and worthwhile. Furthermore they are concerned that progression through the formal system should not entail renouncing one's identity or becoming alienated from core values. Groups such as these are poised to engage with the 'gate-keepers' of knowledge. They merely need a platform where this engagement can be activated.

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