

# The murky waters of neoliberal marketization and commodification on the education of adults in the United States

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## Abstract

*We approach marketization and commodification of adult education from multiple lenses including our personal narratives and neoliberalism juxtaposed against the educational philosophy of the Progressive Period. We argue that adult education occurs in many arenas including the public spaces found in social movements, community-based organizations, and government sponsored programs designed to engage and give voice to all citizens toward building a stronger civil society. We conclude that only when adult education is viewed from the university lens, where it focuses on the individual and not the public good, does it succumb to neoliberal forces.*

**Keywords:** adult education; academic capitalism; neoliberalism; marketization; commodification; progressive education; civil society

## Introduction

Davies (2005), Ball (2003; 2012), and Hursh (2007) critique neoliberalism in education within the narrow confines of institutional academies, whether it is in the public school system or higher education. And though their arguments are eloquent and prickly, they don't capture the complexities of adult education, at least that which we practice in the United States. In this paper we approach the marketization and commodification of adult education from multiple lenses, including our personal narratives seeped in an understanding of scholars who have exhaustively deconstructed this subject from myopic understanding of one arena. Yet it is our narratives that give life to our understanding. We represent two generation of scholars: one being a baby boomer who is in the twilight of his career who has experience in three adult education arenas, and

the other a millennial whose academic career is grounded in the fertile soil of scholarly educational policy analyses.

In this paper we look at three broad arenas of adult education in which we have experience, and attempt to analyze them through a neoliberal perspective of marketization and commodification. We conclude that adult education in universities and colleges falls within the purview of classical neoliberal thought, and though professors of adult education in universities may be critical of neoliberal forces that control their profession, they too must take ownership of this problem.

## **What frames our analysis**

### *Who we are*

Zacharakis began his adult education career as an activist in the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Movement in the late 1970s and 1980s. This was voluntary work that was supported by an outside job. This movement invited all comers regardless of religious or political beliefs, class, race, and age. The common bond shared in this movement was that developing and using nuclear weapons was intolerable and unethical. He would later move on to the poor peoples movement working with Catholic Workers and Northern Illinois University's Lindeman Center in Chicago. These efforts were designed to empower groups and communities facing poverty and marginalization. Though some of this work was supported by grants and other sources of soft money, these programs and activities were free with the goal to win the hearts and souls of citizens with a larger goal to change federal and state policies. With the demands associated with raising a family, Zacharakis' path lead him to a job with Cooperative Extension working at a public land grant university as a community development specialist. Though this trajectory brought him more into the mainstream workforce, it was still consistent with his prior experience in community and organizational development. His Extension work was designed to support and empower rural and urban communities, and to give hope to a declining rural landscape and impoverished urban neighborhoods. Most of this work was funded by state and federal monies supplemented by some grant monies, thereby, allowing his services to be free and available to everyone. His final career move was to his present position as academic faculty at a research university in the Midwest where most of the funds are generated by student tuition, and where program strength is determined by number of students enrolled. Grant money to support this academic work is minimal and used only to support his personal research agenda. Student access in this arena is largely dependent upon one's ability to pay, signifying how marketization and commodification is the cornerstone of sustainability and success.

Holloway approaches this analysis from her own experiences as an adult learner within the traditional postsecondary setting. As a traditional college student, she first attended a large, public university where she earned her bachelor of science degree in public education. After beginning her career as a middle school teacher in 2006, she quickly found herself surrounded by teachers who held, at least, master's degrees. After three years of classroom teaching, she enrolled in graduate school to work towards her master's of education in K-12 administration. Relying on student loans to pay for the steep tuition costs, she reconciled the financial burden with the potential for upward mobility. She found herself among other adults who were also looking to further their careers and/or lead change in their schools. The coursework was practical and not very demanding, but she left with the degree and a new interest in education policy. She immediately enrolled in a Ph.D. program in education policy and evaluation. Having survived the ruthless competition for limited tenure-track positions, she is now in the

earliest stage of her first academic post, where she is subjected to the many ways in which all academics are measured, compared, and evaluated—a regime of accountability that is steeped in neoliberal logics and mechanisms. Though her career trajectory is more traditional than Zacharakis', Holloway's path exemplifies the material trappings of academic status associated with college and university degrees many students today consciously or subconsciously desire. She is both a product of neoliberalism as well as its victim.

With our different life experiences we have engaged each other in dialog and are using this writing project to deconstruct who we are as academics, asking this simple question: Are we pawns within this system with little control of our destiny, or do we have agency that might be used to create cracks within the system, especially if we work together? We both believe, right or wrong, that we have an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of our students and to contribute to a more equitable society. We also realize the limitations of this opportunity and are realistic when analyzing our place within the hierarchical structure of the university. What we know thus far is that adult education is not a monolithic system that is housed only in higher education, and that there is precedence to pursue a different trajectory that is more inclusive and that creates opportunities for those who cannot afford tuition.

#### *A simple framework for adult education*

Based on our experiences, there are three major arenas in which adult education occurs. Here, “educator” is defined broadly to include both traditionally trained/certified educators, as well as grassroots educators who teach in public arenas or in community about social issues.

- 1) Social movements and volunteer initiatives create public spaces where adults can learn and solve problems. Though marketing occurs, it is not based on personal desires for material things, albeit there are many ego-driven motives for power and fame. The purpose of marketing is to win converts and change public policy by changing how we value, for example, the environment, our neighbors who are less fortunate, and how conflict can be resolved. The marketing occurs in public spaces where protest and social media become educational opportunities. The goal is to engage citizens of all shapes, colors and beliefs in order to strengthen the democratic process. The role of the adult educator is often as a volunteer who typically has other sources of income. The learner is positioned as a potential ally in creating change, and is thus provided new information related to a narrow though complex issue. Melucci, Keane and Mier (1989) describe the Freeze Movement and poor people's movement as *new social movements* with singular goals that rationalize global problems related to capitalism and neutralize collective behavior. Holst (2002) in his thesis on social movement and civil society argues that identity politics associated with new social movement tend to divide rather than unite people around issues and problems.
- 2) State-funded and nonprofit programs are where the educators work for a basic salary, receive little recognition, and social status is relatively modest. Examples include university extension programs, including but not limited to Cooperative Extension, community health programs, youth programs, and community centers. Most programs like this are free or low cost, as the community, state or federal government bear the cost. The adult educator is moved to work not by money or status but because he or she feels fulfilled by their work and are contributing to the

lives of the learner and the health of the community. The learners usually participate voluntarily to learn new information that potentially will better their lives, as well as that of their family and community. These programs market their success stories to the community and their granting agency because numbers of learners and program participants is one of the most important metric to measure their values as granting agencies will not continue funding unless the programs are used by many citizens. Other metrics such as behavior change are less important. Regarding extension-like programs, Paul Sheats (1955) wrote that “adult education is planned to meet the immediate and continuing educational needs of adults in solving the problems they face as citizens” (p. 136). This problem-centered approach to adult education captures the essence of these governmental and nonprofit educational programs, as well as that of social movement and community-based education.

- 3) Degree granting programs in universities, especially at research universities, represent a narrow part of adult education in the United States. But for the adult educator, a faculty position has the highest status with the highest potential for income growth and security. Degree programs provide a credentialing opportunity and thereby validate, whether real or not, the learner’s knowledge and expertise. Support for these programs is mostly dependent upon student tuition and full time enrollments. The product is commoditized through uniform and accredited curricula, which is widely recognized by students and their employers. Marketing is essential to attract a steady stream of students and to strengthen the reputations of the program as well as its host institution. In this scenario students are customers who buy and consume a product. The role of the adult learner is less about learning new material and more about helping students earn a credential; hence the credential becomes the *raison d’etre* for students to bare the tuition burden. And society accepts that the learner pays their tuition because it is perceived as a personal goal that will enable him or her to reach their career goals. Rhoades and Slaughter (1997) argue that this phenomenon is a result of supply-side capitalism that shapes policy and is a real lived experience for faculty and students. We question if the higher education manifestation of an adult education graduate program is in fact adult education, and suggest that such graduate programs better fits the higher education model.

This simple framework does not take into account other forms of adult education such as when doctors and nurses provide education for their patients, or when military officers lead their troops by incorporating education and learning. Nor does this framework consider corporate or organizational learning and staff professional development. It is a simple framework that only represents our experiences, yet illustrates the murky waters of commodification and marketization in adult education. Our stories are not unique in that many adult educators move seamlessly between academic and community work fulfilling their obligations as faculty members while working for social change in community or in social movements.

In order to clarify this framework, we first provide analyses of neoliberal precepts related to adult education, focusing on academic capitalism and how educators conform to its sociopolitical tenants. Then we offer a brief history of adult education focusing on the Progressive Period as defined by John Dewey and Eduard Lindeman. This overview is not intended to fully capture adult education’s history—it includes only what we think is most important and representative of our values and experiences. We conclude by deconstructing the role we play as educators in shaping our future.

## Neoliberalism within the complex world of adult education

Neoliberal rationalities have fundamentally changed the concept of education in the USA (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Peters, 1996; 2001; Rabinow & Rose, 2013). Education is no longer a vehicle for self-exploration and improvement, nor a process through which individuals are nurtured as developing, knowledgeable, and well-rounded citizens. Rather than conceptualized as a good for the public, education serves as a good for the individual—a way in which one can (theoretically) climb the economic ladder and contribute to the economic wellbeing of the state. Keddie (1980) reflecting on adult education in the U.K. thirty-five years ago argued that it is much like the rest of education in that its primary role is to help individuals fit into the economic system in order to live a better life without upsetting the status quo. In doing so, education is (re)positioned as an object of personal capital that is necessary to achieve economic success. In other words, education is (re)conceptualized as a commodity to be possessed for personal gain and advancement in the increasingly competitive market. Embracing this logic, President Obama proclaimed in his 2012 State of the Union Address that “a great teacher can offer an escape from poverty to the child who dreams beyond his circumstance” (Obama, 2012, para. 35). Education, then, is no longer about a process for developing a “thinking body of citizens” rather it is imagined as a tool for economic contribution and gain conceptualizing education as first and foremost an individualized endeavor. Adult education, in particular, is configured as a consumer good that is valued and funded in relation to its economic worth (English & Mayo, 2012).

Given this conceptualization of education as a commodity, market-based mechanisms are necessary to measure and evaluate the product so as to give consumers (i.e., students) the knowledge to make value judgments and choices. This need is accomplished with a set accountability processes that function to standardize and quantify nearly every aspect of schooling, including aspects of K-12 schools (e.g., student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and school performance), institutions of higher education (e.g., external grant awards, number of publications, research impact, number of graduates, and class evaluations), and adult education programs designed to place marginalized adults in the workforce (e.g., the gross domestic product, employment statistics). This process has ultimately stripped schools and adult education programs of their purposes to serve as public institutions and/or spaces for citizen development and liberal-oriented growth. Institutions of higher education and adult education programs have traditionally provided the means by which students could attain greater understandings of society, while possibly learning a trade or a set of specialized skills. While the latter was important for the individual, the former was a necessary condition for a civil society.

However, consistent with the neoliberal shift, institutions of higher education have also been (re)configured to serve as market-based entities (Ball, 2012; Hodkinson, 2008). While universities have always been degree-granting institutions, they once were places where the process of education was valued equally, if not more than, with the product (i.e., the degree). Today, however, the market demands that students have *degrees* that do not necessarily equate with *education*. Higher education has met this call, as evidenced by the proliferation of “diploma mills” and other fast-track methods for credential granting, placing greater value on the physical credential than on the process of learning. This has created a ripple effect whereby both individuals and traditional higher education institutions have been forced to compete in this refashioned market. For example, the “New American University”—the brainchild of Arizona State University President, Michael Crow—serves as an emerging model for public research

institutions. Under this new model, more classes are taught online, reducing the number of needed faculty (and thus salary costs) while simultaneously increasing the number of enrolled students (and thus tuition income). Now at 82,000 students, Arizona State aims to enroll 100,000 distance education students in the near future (see [newamericanuniversity.asu.edu](http://newamericanuniversity.asu.edu)).

Simultaneously, adult education programs and adult learning have been reimagined as investments in individuals. This positions the adult learner as a consumer who is responsible for maximizing one's benefit from the program(s), and who is also responsible for marketing oneself as a "lifelong learner" (Olssen, 2006; Simons & Masschelein, 2008). As a result, the state is distanced from the burden of ensuring the wellbeing of the citizenry, and places this burden onto the citizens themselves (Olssen, 2006). It also (re)positions the private sector as a leading factor in adult education configuration (Youngman, 2000).

This reconfiguration also has implications for the higher education "student". Individuals sans higher education credential, regardless of age or field, are placed at a disadvantage amidst their increasingly degree-holding peers, and students within higher education seek positions and placed based on their individual performance and output as explained by Luhmann's (1977; 2006) social differentiation within systems. As such, we have witnessed a steady increase in enrollment of students aged 25 years and older, and by 2023 this increase is predicted to be higher than that of students aged 25 years and younger for the first time in history (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). In a time where the need for a college degree has replaced the need for the high school diploma (Farrington, 2014), adults are under greater pressure to attain credentials beyond high school in order to remain competitive for jobs and career advancement. Adult education (i.e., that which is not associated with traditional postsecondary education and institutionalized agencies), however, has been largely overlooked in the critiques of neoliberalism and its influence on the higher education arena.

Neoliberalism is shaping adult education in ways that our forefathers would never have imagined. Though democratization of the civilization is still a foundational topic in many adult education courses, we are in the business of recruiting students who pay tuition. We rely on Rhoades and Slaughter's (1997; 2004) explanation of academic capitalism and Bagnall's (1999) thesis of open marketeering to explain how adult education has evolved into a turbo capitalistic venture (Finger & Asun, 2001) where only entrepreneurial faculty and universities will survive. Brookfield (2005) argues that we are trapped in what Marx described as a commodity exchange economy governed by market forces where "I give you this, you give me that in return" (p. 24). Again closely related to what our for-profit partners (who we are quick to denigrate this motive) have taught us that success is defined by growth in student enrollment, we find ourselves at the mercy of a numbers game marketing a commodity. Paradoxically, we critique a system that emphasizes numbers, but our avenue to do this is through publishing academic papers only to attain the number of publications we need to earn tenure and keep our employment. Thus, we only work to reify the system we so oppose. In doing so we contribute to the marginalization of organically developed models of adult learning by sustaining a system that positions adult learners as paying customers rather than developing citizens.

As Rhoades and Slaughter (1997) point out, not-for-profit higher education institutions are not simply suppliers in this market they are "active players in the marketplace" (p. 13). They are not passive victims of neoliberalism—they are part of the problem. This is further complicated by their funding mechanisms, which is partially reliant on public monies. Universities, public or private, are primarily funded

by tuition and research grants. Tuition is often supported by high interest rate loans, and research grants are often the source of federal incentives. As such, the *public* has a vested interest in the universities, yet “academic capitalism” (Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997) keeps universities from serving the needs of the public and instead forces them to serve their own market needs and values.

Simultaneously, academic capitalism affords protection for universities in ways not offered to private sector entities because the product being “sold” by universities is increasingly in demand by individuals. These customers, also competing in an increasingly competitive market, must pay for higher education to attain the credential, and thus increase their market worth. This demand allows universities to increase tuition (at a higher rate than inflation), thereby forcing individuals to rely more heavily on high interest rate loans. This change is dramatic for doctoral students where the percentage of students with six-figure loans grew between 2007-2012 from 4.9% to 35.1% for Ed.D. students and from 4.7%-9.7% for Ph.D. students (which includes all Ph.D. students not just those in education) (Kantrowitz, 2014, p. 6). And in 2012 the average loan for Ed.D. students was \$42,525 (US) and for Ph.D. students it was \$58,525 (US) (p. 4). These statistics align with the average median increase in tuition for graduate students at from \$6,594 to \$9,445 (US) between 2007 and 2012, which is a 43% increase over five years (Digest of Education Statistics, 2014, p. 1). This growth occurred during a period in which the average inflation in the United States was between 1.5 and 1.6% (World Bank Data, n.d., p. 1). In essence we have created a sustainable system (as can be witnessed by its infallibility during the market crash of 2008) whereby public funds are providing the means for public institutions to function as market players, all the while divesting service from the good of the public. This denigrates the fundamental principles upon which higher education was built and forces a new population of adult learners into an endeavor that functions in the interest of the market, rather than the interests of the learners. This also brings into question the influence that marketization has on adult learning in general, which was originally conceived as a democratizing effort.

### **The progressive roots of adult education shape our analysis**

We argue that the American adult education project has been coopted by the individualism promoted in widely read books by Knowles (1970) and Brookfield (2015) which focus on teaching and learning, resulting in the myopic vision that andragogy might be the holy grail that provides a unifying set of principles to our field, or that being a *skillful* teacher is the most important attribute of an adult educator. In defense of Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher* does not represent the strength of his critical reflection on adult education’s philosophies, culture, and politics. Yet this one book is not only his best seller but also his one book most American graduate students in the field will read. Instead we focus on the Progressive Period and the contributions of Rauschenbusch, Dewey, Addams, Lindeman, and later Horton, to provide philosophical umbrella to guide adult educators into the future where the common good and the need to have engaged citizens in all aspects of civil society is required to sustain a vibrant democracy. We look at these formative years during the Progressive Period to better understand the roots of adult education in the United States, and to see if we can recapture or reformulate a strategy to free us from the shackles of academic capitalism as defined by Rhoades and Slaughter (1997). We also see the trend to emphasize

teaching and learning as tangible, quantifiable processes symptomatic of marketization and commodification (Davies & Bansel, 2010).

Walter Rauschenbusch published in 1908 *Christianity and the Social Crisis* where he argued that as the population shifted from rural to urban, the results of the industrial revolution was people losing control of industry as well as their land. Though workers' wages had increased marginally during this time, Rauschenbusch pointed out that at any given moment they were only weeks from destitution while management and ownership reaped most of the profits from their labor. As the leading voice of the *social gospel* that sought justice and fairness before greed, he challenged unfettered capitalism, shaped his generation's discourse on citizenship, and what it means to have an equitable democracy. His voice, using Christian values, influenced leading educators of his day including Jane Addams, John Dewey and Eduard Lindeman. In *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams (1902) wrote that political reform required a sense of collective understanding; "This is the penalty of a democracy—that we are bound to move forward or retrograde together. None of us can stand aside—our feet are mired in the same soil, and our lungs breathe the same air" (p. 256). In voice that emphasized social responsibility and citizen engagement Addams (1915) later wrote a short pamphlet on why women should vote, arguing that they were providing the children who would one day labor in factories and therefore had a vested interest that they be treated fairly and paid equitably. Though most known for her work with in immigrants in settlement houses, she understood that in order to influence civil society women needed to be enfranchised in the political system by being allowed to vote. As her peer, Dewey (1916) argued that education was essential to solving social problems and needed to develop a fully engaged citizenry when he wrote, "Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life" (p. 2). Eduard Lindeman (1926) provided in *The Meaning of Adult Education* the voice that connected the Progressive philosophy to adult education, and later wrote that "adult education is integral to the democratic struggle" where the "so-called common man learns to use his collective power intelligently and wisely" (Lindeman, 1945, p.10).

In 1932, Francis Brown, chair of the Committee of Adult Education of the Department of Superintendents, wrote: "the very foundation of our Government rests upon enlightened public opinion. This necessitates and intelligent, alert, thinking body of citizens" (p. 476). Shelby (1926) pushed this notion one step further by arguing that the large tax expenditures required for public universities could only "be justified by rendering service to the whole people" (p. 2). In 1955, *Adult Education* published nine essays written by leading scholars on what is adult education. Though there were diverse perspectives the unifying concept centered on it being embedded within community and organizations, more than merely educating individuals. In one of the nine essays Carl Minich (1955) arguably stated the purpose of adult education best: "Adult education should be available to *all* the people and not limited to economically or intellectually favored minorities. This is simply another way of saying that if adult education is to become an accepted part of our democratic way of life it must be democratically conceived and developed" (p. 140). This democratic way of life embodied an understanding in these nine essays that the strength of our society is dependent on the strength of low income, working class, and middle class people, especially those from immigrant families who arrived on our shores with visions of a better life and a willingness to work hard.

Progressive era philosophies and values initially created space for both social movement and institutional education to emerge as accepted forms of adult education where diversity of purpose came together to form a stronger society. This is when labor



colleges and Highlander Folk School emerged as important sources of organized labor education (Altenbaugh, 1990; Horton, 1989) and Cooperative Extension focused on working with farmers to improve their quality of life, including African-American farmers, reaching 85% of the of white farm families and 74% of “Negro” farm families in some areas (Bruner & Yang, 1949, p. 158). These efforts represented movements to lift the lives of people who were marginalized and whose communities were underdeveloped. Though adult educators working in social movements, such as the labor movement in the 1930s and for government or agency sponsored activities such as Cooperative Extension during the same period, practiced in many different arenas they shared a goal to develop a stronger civil society and worked within a political milieu that was outside the dominant culture. The overarching goal they shared was to assist workers and farmers in earning a living wage off the fruits of their labor. Their goals were akin to Jane Addams’s work in Chicago’s Hull House, and represent how adult education could (and can today) empower people to have more control of their lives, and contribute to civil society.

Probably the one book that captured the essence of adult education as formulated during the Progressive Period was Waller’s (1956) *A Design for Democracy*, which was an edited abridgement of the 1919 report to the Adult Education Committee of the British Ministry of Reconstruction. The motives of adult education in this seminal book were articulated as:

Inextricably interwoven with the whole of the organized life of the community. Whilst on the one hand it originates in a desire amongst individuals for adequate opportunities for self-expression and the cultivation of their personal powers and interests, it is, on the other hand, rooted in the social aspirations of the twin principles of personal development and social service. It aims at satisfying the needs of the individual and the attainment of new standards of citizenship and a better social order. (p. 149)

Waller in publishing this report for the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., the Canadian Association for Adult Education, and the National Institute of Adult Education, Great Britain, recognized its relevance and timelessness. He noted in the introduction that this “is probably the most important single contribution ever made to the literature of adult education” (p. 15), even though it had been out of print since 1923.

The transition to formally recognizing adult education as an integral part of American higher education can be traced to the Teachers College, Columbia University (1930), Ohio State University (1931), University of Chicago (1935), and New York University (1935) (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 233). Initially such programs held prestigious positions within higher education, providing a sense of scholarship. Overtime, adult education graduate programs and especially doctoral degree granting programs have mushroomed with a high demand from potential students able to pay tuition and fill seats, at the cost of losing much of the scholarly prestige initially associated with this degree. Though there was resistance to this commodification from a few lonely voices such as John Ohliger (1968; 1982) in the 1970s and 1980s, the business of providing a non-licensed degree in education for those who were not working in public schools grew where today the degree is more important to career advancement than what is learned or the institution from where it is earned. A quick search on the web shows that presently there are more than seventy adult education graduate programs at public and private universities in the United States, plus many more at for-profit institutions. The only way these programs can survive is to fill seats in their classrooms by marketing this degree to a broad spectrum of individuals. Within

this postmodern world of higher education, adult education degrees offer an entrepreneurial opportunity to grow enrollments in colleges of education.

Sadly our students in the United States today seldom read Rauschenbusch, Dewey, Addams, or most importantly Waller's reprint of the 1919 Report. This leaves us asking this question: In what ways do neoliberal principles undermine the early efforts of adult education and rearticulate it as a personal rather than a public good? Perhaps we also need to question how our roles as adult learners, adult educators, and university faculty, contribute to the perpetuation of market over public values?

### **Agency vs. structure: our failure to pay anything more than lip service**

Neoliberalism cannot be analyzed without looking closely at the intersection between agency and structure. Giddens (1979) wrote, "*every social actor knows a great deal about the conditions of reproduction of the society of which he or she is a member*" (p. 5). Giddens may have been naïve to think every social actor is aware when arguably they are only playing roles they inherited in a theatrical sense with little awareness or consciousness of the role they play. If we see these theatrics merely as structure that cannot be changed, then all is lost and the adult education project as defined by Progressive leaders will become an historical footnote that is taught in graduate level classes. If we see ourselves as agents we have the power to make changes, but this will require personal sacrifice. Foucault (1982) argued, "I would like to underline the fact that the state's power (and that one of the reasons for its strength) is both an individualizing and a totalizing form of power" (p, 213). We reject the deterministic dualistic construct between agency and structure in that this dichotomy is not static and is in fact in continual flux shaped by the agent's contestation of the status quo (Reed, 1997). Gaventa (1980) captures this complexity of agency vs. structure in his treatise *Power and Powerlessness* in which he analyzes how power created a sense of quiescence in a rural Appalachian coal mining community. This type of power is not overt but hidden as it manages and manipulates consent among oppressed groups. Nor is it static as quiescence can over time be transformed into rebellion. Not surprisingly, Gaventa is an example of adult educators who move seamlessly throughout their careers between academe and community.

The question has never been about eliminating freedom of choice, only about limiting the conscious and subconscious realm of possibilities resulting in feelings of futility or acceptance of the status quo. Hence, the battle to stave off neoliberalism must include professors of adult education working side by side with practitioners who lead and participate in social movements or are community educators in public spaces. And if we as faculty at a university are honest we have been seduced by the structure, the status, and the monetary security of tenure. Though we decry academic capitalism, we participate in its creation. "We have met the enemy, and he is us" (Kelly, 1987). This famous Pogo comic first published in 1970 captures the comedic nature of the dilemma we find ourselves in. Agency and structure, we argue, are intertwined and interdependent where the argument can be made that structure is created by people, albeit people who have power. Yet even the weakest among us is not powerless.

The neoliberal argument that individual good will lead to civic good and that accumulating personal capital is the fruit of education negates why many of us entered adult education as a vocation. While some of us may require our students to read historical texts by Rauschenbusch, Addams, Dewey, Lindeman or Waller, or more contemporary texts by Gaventa (1980), Youngman (2000) or Allman (2010), we do not

expect any changes in their behavior or any commitment to a more equitable social order. Who we are and who we perceive ourselves to be is confounding since most of our students represent privileged groups who can afford to pay or are willing to mortgage their future by taking out loans for their degree. We fail to see that we can do more, that we can raise the expectations of our students, that we can recruit and support students who see themselves as change agents, and that most importantly that we have a choice to change our personal behavior, which is an essential first step.

The problem with the neoliberal argument when applied to adult education is that it only fits that part of our project in traditional classrooms within traditional colleges and universities, both of which have been imprisoned by the accouterments associated with more education and more degrees. At our university there is little money to support working class and low-income adult students, and this problem is only exacerbated by public sentiment against taxes and public monies for education. This trend is especially troubling to Zacharakis whose doctoral education was paid for by monies designated to support social justice. Yet this problem of marketization and commodification does not occur in all adult education arenas. As social movements arise to confront the corporate forces in society, our adult education peers who lead and give life to these movements are not deterred by the fact there is no money, no status, and no security. The same is true for most of our colleagues who work in community centers, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Though they do have more security than their brothers and sisters working in movements and can make a sustainable wage, they are often motivated by their contribution to their community and civic society. Those of us in higher education have a more difficult time making this claim.

### Final thoughts

As we work on this paper from the perspective of two generations and two different experiences we realize that we are at risk of being coopted by a neoliberal system that demands we market and commoditize this product called adult education degrees, if for no other reason to insure the sustainability of our place within the academy. We recognize that using our personal experiences to demonstrate how neoliberalism is functioning to marketize and commodify adult education and learning in higher education institutions limits our analysis by negating how adult education is structured in community and other places. However, we also argue that by positioning ourselves within this new configuration is a valuable way for us to recognize not only what neoliberalism is doing, but also how we, as academics, contribute to its reification. Zacharakis recalls his time with Phyllis Cunningham, who was his dissertation advisor at Northern Illinois University. She not only found money to pay for his education, but also for the education many of his classmates who were activists from around the world with the potential to become change agents in adult education. She pulled together a critical mass of American and international students who stimulated each other with their ideas and their life experiences, and worked to internationalize adult education in the US. The question of tuition or money to attend a conference was never discussed. Looking back, he realizes that without her financial and personal support, most of us in that class would not have been able to pursue a graduate degree. His entire career is a reflection of Cunningham's ability to create opportunities for those who might not have it otherwise. Holloway is just beginning her career and wonders if the best she can do is publish articles and books on neoliberalism and educational policy with little hope of

making change. She sees higher education departments follow the rational/technical trend by changing their foci from “studies” to “evaluation”. Halfway through her Ph.D. studies, her program changed from *Educational Leadership and Policy Studies* to *Education Policy and Evaluation*. Not thinking much of it at the time, she now looks back and wonders whether this was yet another product of the neoliberal regime within which we live and work. And here she is, living the “publish-or-perish” reality that is the academic life.

Adult education is a murky and ill-defined waterway where the tenants of neoliberalism, marketization, and commodification cannot be equally applied to all of its projects. Though they hold true within university degree-granting programs, these programs are in essence forms of postsecondary or higher education and arguably are not part of the adult education project. But if we subscribe to the vision of our Progressive pioneers who held that the purpose of adult education was to strengthen and sustain a democratically inspired civil society, such neoliberal arguments can only be applied in certain situations when those public institutions are designed to reproduce the status quo which does not fairly or justly distribute the fruits of society to all its citizens. Finally we argue that though the neoliberal force of marketization and commodification are powerful, there is still the issue of agency vs. structure. Historically we show that the adult education project was about making a stronger democracy by focusing on civil society including those who have been marginalized and left behind within a poorly regulated capitalist system. With this in mind, we attempt to answer Paula Allman’s (2010) call for critical educators to “ask probing questions about what is happening and about how we understand and feel about the events that are taking place” (p. 13). Allman challenges adult educators to reimagine what might be rather than simply critique what we are experiencing today and resigning ourselves to impotency. As agents we can choose to be merely beneficiaries of a higher education system that holds its faculty in high esteem and differentiates students through curriculum and grading (Vanderstraeten, 2004), or we can choose to find cracks in the system that can be exploited and pushed open in order to create a more democratic society where all are valued as citizens and members of a common community, and all have the opportunity to contribute to the dialog in our classrooms. These cracks can be widened by having our students participate with us as we work in community, consider borrowing the service learning model used elsewhere in higher education (Enos, 2015; McDonald & Dominquez, 2015), give university credit for prior work in community or with social movements, or most importantly be creative and find news ways we can engage students with adult education outside of academe. The challenge we present is to revisit the Progressive roots of adult education, realize our limitations as faculty, and not to become enamored and complacent as adult educators in higher education who benefit from neoliberalism in higher education.

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