

The National Institute on the Assessment of Adult Learning

14 June 2017

Opening Plenary

Thanks so much for this generous introduction, Jessie [Kindred].

Years ago, I went to a poetry reading at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery. I cannot remember the poet, but he (I'm pretty sure it was a "he") said that he wanted to write a poem that only included "thanks." I can't remember if he tried. I love the idea because he and I both know that the list is quite infinite.

It's impossible for me to acknowledge all of the people who have been involved in this institute since its start, and thus those people who have meant so much to my learning, and to the learning of others, too. Surely, the president of Thomas Edison State University, George Prewitt, has spent decades supporting this institute. He easily could have let it die, or just fade away. He didn't. What an amazing part of the Prewitt legacy to remember. And Bill Seaton of Edison has been an ongoing champion, too.

It was incredible that so many people critical to adult learning and to PLA have been part of this annual undertaking. Morris Keeton, who inspired all of us for so long, was in attendance almost every year until his death in 2014. And so was Barry Schekley and Urban Whitaker and Diana Bamford-Reese and Debbi Dagavarian, who led the institute for so long. A deep bow to them.

Thanks to Marc Singer for his support of me and everyone here. It's hard to do this year in and year out. Marc's spirit abounds. To my dear PLA colleagues at Empire State College, including Nan Travers, Leslie Ellis, Michele Forte, Tom Kerr and Bhuwan Onta, most of whom are here with us. And to everyone at CAEL. It's so important to mention how crucial Becky Klein Collins' research has been to our thinking and to important efforts to move us beyond the anecdotal. Terri Hoffman has been incredibly devoted to helping new colleagues learn about PLA policies and processes. I also want to mention Todd Siben, an institute regular and, for yes, my ride to the train, and to Jessie Kindred. I have so appreciated Jessie's ideas and her clarity and her crucial efforts to make sure we remember everyday workers' work.

And there are many many others. Sorry if I have missed any key people.

Maybe this is my speech: I'll just stand here and continue to offer people thanks!

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I am honored to have been asked to give this talk--very much so.

There are a number of points I'd like to make. I've thought of them as "chapters." I hope you'll bear with me and see if I can make the connections. They've been percolating around in my head for a while. I hope the links come through. I look forward to our discussion and to your questions

For me, this talk is about what I am thinking about as openings and closings, about a step forward and, maybe, at least two steps back. It's also about hope.

Chapter 1. Connected to the "Thanks," because it's connected to our legacy. And it's not a new point. PLA and the recognition of prior learning is part of a social movement. This is crucial to remember. As many people here are aware, one of the key tenets of the world of adult education has been the place of experience in learning. Yes, people often refer to John Dewey, though Dewey was much more interested in children than in adults, and during most of his years at the Chicago Lab School, the school only went up to the 8th grade (it was expanding to high school just as he left for New York). But I recommend that you have a look at, for example, Eduard Lindeman's writings in the 1920s. "Education is life," Lindeman wrote, "not a mere preparation for an unknown kind of future living." For Lindeman, "The whole of life is learning," and "the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner's experience." "If education is life," Lindeman concluded, "then life is also education." Wow, I say.

The PLA movement was thus part of a larger movement to acknowledge experience and to develop a critical stance. As others have pointed out, Morris Keeton was not only a big champion of recognizing prior learning; he was an advocate of *all* experiential learning. The Antioch legacy of learning-through-experience was part of what Morris brought to CAEL and to the University of Maryland, University College. (Keeton was at Antioch for 30 years!)

But the PLA movement grew out of the experiential learning movement and was—and this is the point—significantly critical of the distorting stodginess of higher education that has always been obsessed with seat time and professing and the claim that the university contained within it everything that was worth knowing. At its core, those who advocated for the recognition of prior learning argued that learning was happening all over the place and all of the time. It was not confined to some college classroom or to the corridors of power of the university.

Do you see how, in effect, PLA was linked to the social movement of educational reform in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s? Break down the walls of the university; admit that students know something before they arrive; these are barriers of access that need to be taken down. That's what PLA has done. It's impressive.

So, final point in chapter #1: PLA is about access; it's about admitting that the university's claim to be the reservoir of everything that a so-called educated person needs to know is highly problematic. PLA is about another recognition: that, yes, knowledge is constructed and is often narrowly constructed to limit who is welcome at the university. There's so much to say about this, but it could be summed up as this: PLA is, at its core, a radical educational movement particularly if we see how it is has been used as a partner in social movements. (I need to mention, for example, the work that people like our colleague, Elana Michelson have done in South Africa and her beautifully complex work on PLA and gender. Take a look: It's terrifically provocative and rich.)

PLA is frightening to the status quo because of all of the questions it raises about knowledge and thus, of course, about power. What happens to that fear? After a time, does PLA-fear just go away? Are we here to celebrate a PLA victory? Has our PLA-inspired social movement won? Should we be partying as more and more institutions admit that PLA should become a taken-for-granted part of their academic plans or that entire nations include PLA as part of their policy frameworks? Do we have a victory on our hands?

Chapter #2: And here, at least in part, I don my sociological cap. We are proud of what could be called “our modernity”—of spectacular technical feats, of the curing of diseases (think of small pox) that killed millions and millions not so long ago, of the reduction of poverty (the number of people in the world who live in extreme

poverty has dropped more than 35% over the last 30 years); of the extension of schooling to those who, across the world, never had an educational chance, of the fact that the average life expectancy in the United States was 57 in 1929 and is now about 80. And there are so many other examples under that big umbrella of what we call “progress.”

At the same time, we live in a world of incredible pain and inequality. Just stay with America for a second: About 15% of Americans in 2015 lived below the poverty level defined for a family of four as \$24,257/year, and that doesn't include what sociologists think about as “episodic” poverty—those who are officially poor for regular yet shorter periods due to job loss or health care costs or other factors. And what do we think about the fact that in 2016, the average pay for the CEO of this country's top 100 largest corporations was 16.6 million dollars? And you may have seen this, not long ago, that the CEO of Charter Communications made \$98 million last year alone. So the economic situation is quite stunning, at least stunning to some.

And too, we live in a world of immense “worry”—some have written about this as an age of psychological and sociological anxiety in which parents fear for their kids' futures and are anxious about what their kids think and feel and do; in which textures of communities are fizzling-away, in which a job-loss, seemingly just around the corner for so many, might doom a person and her/his family; and in which the very notion, our ideal, of “personhood” seems at risk. This is all part of what Walter Mignolo of Duke University refers to as “the darker side of western modernity.” It is a world in which—even as we acknowledge the “progress” of civilization (and, again, how can we not?), has not come close to solving discrimination, racism, depression, drug use (just think that 62,000 deaths in America due to drug overdose are expected this year), and levels of stunning economic inequality in which, as OXFAM has famously reported, 1% of the world's population has more wealth than the rest of the world combined. (This is completely beyond belief. But it's true. Imagine looking at 100 people; one of those hundred has more money than the other 99 combined!)

What do we do—in our heads and in our hearts—with the remarkable progress that we have to notice and, at the same time, with what many people feel-- at the core of their being--to be the diminishing prospects for what lies ahead, and who fear an

emotionally deadening and soul shrinking world—even as its technical capacities, for example, seem beyond the imagination? As Karl Marx so presciently put in a way that reflects our worry: “All that is solid melts into air.”

Is this a victory? What have we gained? Can we continue to live in and with such a “liquid” form of social life, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes the profound instabilities of our so-called post-modern state? One step forward? One step back?

Chapter 3: I’d like to offer this chapter as another example of openings and closings. I first got this idea after, years ago, studying the work of the sociologist, Kurt H. Wolff. While he was mostly known as a translator of the greatest hits of sociological theory, Wolff wrote a pretty obscure but wonderful book in 1976 called *Surrender and Catch*. What do we “surrender”? What is the “catch”? And with that new catch, what’s the new surrender? I thought of Wolff’s work when, over the last week, I read a paper that one of my students wrote. This student has been exploring the realities of race in America and, impressively as I see it, he’s been trying to understand what happened during the period of Reconstruction that followed the American Civil War, and to connect it to what is going on today. That is, after having read Ta-Nehisi Coates’ beautifully disturbing extended letter to his son, *Beyond the World and Me*—my student’s first reading in this guided independent study, he wanted to figure out how we got to where we are. He wanted to dive into the history. This was student-initiated learning at its best. I was just following along.

My point here is not at all to try to carefully examine the period in the US between 1865 and 1877—indeed, there are probably people here who know this history more thoroughly than I do, but to say this (perhaps simplistically): Two things are going on in America during this period: an extraordinary triumph and celebration of freedom for four million people and, at the very same time, an effort on the part of many in the American South to reassert white authority in every possible way, in every conceivable crevice of society.

During this period, the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the US Constitution became the law of the land. Slavery was abolished; all citizens were acknowledged to have equal protection under the law; and, as the 15th amendment explicitly lays

it out, the voting rights of citizens cannot be abridged based on race, color or “previous conditions of servitude.” Indeed, Juneteenth, celebrated next Monday, the 19th, marks the end of slavery. It’s emancipation day!

Still, look what was happening, too. During Reconstruction, there were efforts to re-segregate public places (if, indeed, they had ever begun to be integrated); there were myriad ploys and so-called “Black Codes” to halt former slaves from owning their own land; indeed, as my student so effectively described in his essay: “The Black Codes were an attempt to resolve the principal dilemma facing the South: How to reestablish a system of labor and labor discipline that could as closely as possible mimic the previous system of slavery.” And, of course, there was the terror of the Ku Klux Klan that began in the middle 1860s and sought to reassert white supremacy through massive intimidation of Black citizens and their white allies by hooded men, torches in hand, riding across the night, and through assassination.

So, as my student (a 40-year old white college student) and Coates (now a successful Black journalist-intellectual probably around the same age as my student) both fiercely understand, freedom does not explode into being and perfectly eradicate hatred and all of what Coates describes as that “cosmic injustice.” There is change; slavery is gone; people are free; and, lest we forget, now more than 150 years later, the reverberations of slavery still touch this society in profoundly troubling ways. Read Coates; read Michael Eric Dyson’s *Tears We Cannot Stop*. A victory? Where have we been? Where are we right now? Is it steps forward and then back?

Chapter 4: If you would stay with me, I’d like to give one more, short example here in chapter 4 before returning to PLA. It’s the Excelsior Scholarship, which was trumpeted by Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York and included in the state’s 2018 budget agreement. The scholarship, I believe, the first of its kind in the country, “will provide tuition-free college at New York’s public colleges and universities to families making up to \$125,000 a year.” On the face of it, this is quite extraordinary (the chancellor of the State University of New York called it “groundbreaking”) and, of course, a stunning political victory for an ambitious

politician trying to better his dad. It means that thousands and thousands of mostly middle class students will have access to a free public higher education. This is exactly the kind of access to higher education that progressives have demanded for years. It is a triumph. How can one doubt that? It's fantastic and will make a significant difference in many families' lives. (Please remember, 44 million student loan borrowers now owe 1.4 trillion dollars.)

And yet, also think of our students, the students who come to our programs—our working adult part-time students. Students receiving the Excelsior Scholarships must fulfill three provisions: They must be full-time students; they must complete 30 credits/year, and they must continue to reside in New York State post-graduation for the same number of years in which they have received the scholarship. If they stumble, if they can't keep up, their "scholarship" will automatically become a "loan."

We live in a society in which people continue to use the phrase "non-traditional student," even though the non-traditional has now become the traditional, the norm. We live in a world in which whole institutions have come to depend on the 26, the 32 and the 50 year-old working adult, even though just fifteen short years ago, that same institution would not have wanted to touch that student with a ten-foot pole.

Here is my question: Can it be that the opening of doors to higher education for some could mean the further marginalization of others who, actually, are now in the majority? What is opening and what is closing here? What can we celebrate? Are our applause for this scholarship just premature? Are they wrongheaded? Are we being manipulated, hoodwinked, by the rhetoric that is, truly, so appealing?

Chapter 5: As I tried to describe earlier, PLA was, at its inception, a radical idea: pretty incredible. It's amazing how many shibboleths PLA disrupted, how many higher education sacred cows PLA took on. And, as CAEL's research has shown, PLA has blasted forward. I think there were a dozen or so original CAEL institutions about four decades ago, public and private colleges experimenting with policies and processes and really trying to shape a new way of thinking about learning, because, of course, that was it: PLA put learning in the spotlight; PLA asked: Are you sure you know learning when you see it? Why is "this" learning

and not “that” learning? What are your assumptions about knowledge and who defines it and who has it and who can assess what is valid? These were—and are—profoundly difficult and disrupting questions for bastions of surety that have relied on often undisturbed traditions of expertise and authority. The fact that thousands of institutions not only in North America but literally all over the globe have embraced PLA or RPL, the recognition of prior learning, is pretty astonishing. Yes, as I said earlier, we are all, everyone here today, part of a victorious social movement. As we will hear from Jon Talbot [from the University of Chester, UK] tomorrow, it’s international for sure!

But actually, as I’ve tried to ask in the previous “chapters” of this talk, where are we right now? What have we opened? What’s our surrender? Can we describe our new catch? Some people in this room may question my appraisal—and I look forward to our discussion of this, but I’d argue that as the PLA movement has become a more typical part of the terrain, its scope has actually narrowed. PLA has become more and more connected with vocationalism and with classifactory systems of training and competence. Put in another way, because PLA has effectively let the genie out of the bottle, some know that it’s time to close it up. Bottom line: The fear is not gone.

As I noted at the start, at its core, PLA has been about rethinking experience and learning. It has been about questioning authority and empowering students by asking them: What do you know? Where did you learn it? Help us understand your ideas and your insights and your skills. The creation of the “portfolio”—for decades the heart of this institute-- has given way today to a crazy quilt of frameworks and rubrics and qualifications--any standardized way to dampen the radical claims about new learning that just does not fit into the university or into any pre-existing schema, however elegant that schema seems to be. Indeed, PLA has taken-off because, for some, it has become a new tool of a new cutthroat economy. It’s being embraced as a band aid, a stopgap, for a troubling and troubled system.

As in the case of each earlier chapter I’ve tried to describe here, we have to continue to ask: What is opening up and what is closing down? Yes: the what’s opening up is pretty clear. The knowledge and skills that students bring to the table

are taken more seriously now than they were in the past. This is what our social movement has called for! Another victory.

However, at the same time, a world such as ours—so beset with economic, political, cultural problems and confusions—a world where uncertainties and disruptions abound, PLA, as I see it, has become one of many modes of social control. There is vast and ongoing change everywhere and the very legitimacy of social institutions (surely including schools of all kinds) is being questioned. Within such a context, the institutionalization of PLA/RPL policies is called upon to provide predictability and domestication. Who needs the messy and expensive PLA portfolio that actually celebrates questions and diversity, and invites multiple interpretations and the need for dialogue, when one can construct elaborate assessment instruments and/or trot out the newest standardized exam or list of competences designed by the experts? And, as an antidote to the mystification that abounds, the new PLA makes a claim for transparency—and who would not want such clarity when so many traditions of knowing continue to be overthrown? Please: Order in the house! Hold back the chaos.

Imagine for a second a world in which everything you do, everything you think, and as Sting would put it, every move you make, could not only be seen but meticulously categorized and your performance assessed. This is Jeremy Bentham's late 18th century panopticon; it's a world of surveillance and of measurement by the experts. It's a world of a hundred-eyed monster where people are invisible to each other but never invisible to the authorities. It's a world in which people carry around a little chip (maybe it's housed right in their skin), always updatable, that contains the assessment of all of the work they have ever done and all the skills they have ever gained. Oh for predictability! And here we have what Foucault would call a truly "disciplinary society."

What can we do? What do we feel? What have we opened up? What have we caught?

Have all of us worked so hard for most of our professional lives as little prophets of PLA only to see our dream turned into a nightmare, as learning is reduced to assessment and as volumes and volumes of testing schemes and generic

evaluations and rubrics and rubrics, and descriptions of competencies of everything in the whole wide world go public? Is this what we really want?

Here is what I have been thinking—these, my final words for now. I think we have to go back; we have to remember the core values embedded in PLA. We have to figure out what was radical about the notion and what we want to hold onto and what has been lost. We have to be thoughtful, discerning, and super vigilant about the tensions and contradictions inherent in every scheme we come up with. We have to remember student voices and the textures of their experience. And, I think, we have to remain aware of the ways in which mechanisms of power (the power of people, institutions and ideas) twist possibility, critique and deep inquiry about “knowledge” into what the sociologist Max Weber in 1920 worried aloud was an “iron cage,” a “housing hard as steel” that can sometimes--even with the best of intentions of doing otherwise--build up around us and keep us down.

Alan Mandell