

Chapter Ten Critical Theory, Postmodern, and Feminist Perspectives

Adult learning in North America has been most influenced by psychology, with its focus on individual learners, their growth and development, and their learning in and out of formal settings. In this chapter, where we approach adult learning from a critical, power relations framework, the camera moves from the individual learner to an analysis of the context where learning takes place. Considered are the larger systems in society, the culture and institutions that shape learning, and the structural and historical conditions framing, indeed defining, the learning event.

The learning process itself is less of a focus than the economic, historical, and sociocultural context in which that learning takes place. Questioning and critiquing taken-for-granted worldviews, structures, and institutions of society are the first steps in changing oppressive and nonemancipatory practices. Further, our assumptions about the nature of knowledge—including what counts as knowledge, where it is located (in the individual or in society), and how it is acquired—are also challenged. These questions about knowledge are particularly important for adult educators because presumably the construction and acquisition of knowledge are inherent in the teaching-learning transaction. Because this approach critiques and raises questions about the assumptions we make about the world around us, including those underlying the practice of adult education, this stance is often called *critical*, as in *critical adult education*.

A number of specific philosophical and theoretical orientations inform this approach to adult education and adult learning, including Marxism, critical theory, critical multiculturalism, critical race theory, postcolonialism, queer theory, postmodernism, and feminist theory. Although some adult educators are clearly identified with a specific orientation, a number of others draw from several theoretical perspectives. **Hart's (1992)** analysis of work and learning, for example, is anchored in Marxism, critical theory, and feminist theory. **Tisdell (1998)** draws from multiculturalism, feminist theory, and poststructuralism in proposing a model of feminist pedagogy for adult education classrooms. **Hill (2004)** combines critical theory and postmodernism in his analysis of activism around sexual orientation and gender identity. Grace (1996a, 1997) maintains that critical theory, feminism, and postmodernism inform one another to the extent that common themes or assumptions can be derived to guide adult learning practices. Further, many educators writing from several of these perspectives claim indebtedness to Paulo **Freire's (1970)** work. The noted Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1994, p. 46), for example, speaks of coming to Freire's work "just at that moment in my life when I was beginning to question deeply and profoundly the politics of domination, the impact of racism, sexism, class exploitation, and the kind of domestic colonization that takes place in the United States. ... Paulo was one of the thinkers whose work gave me a language. He made me think deeply about the construction of an identity in resistance."

This chapter first provides a brief overview of some of the major themes, concepts, and terms that characterize perspectives derived from Marxist theory, critical theory, multiculturalism, critical race theory, postmodernism, and feminist theory. The chapter then focuses on three perspectives where contributions to adult learning have been most visible—critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist theory/pedagogy.

Common Themes

An understanding of adult learning and adult education from the perspective of critique and empowerment mandates some familiarity with basic concepts and terminology. In this section, we

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discuss three themes that characterize this perspective: race, class, and gender, which figure prominently in a critical analysis of adult learning; power and oppression, both key concepts; and knowledge and truth, which are construed in different ways depending on the school of thought. These themes are, of course, highly interrelated; it is not possible to talk about racism, classism, sexism, and other “isms” without reference to power and oppression, nor can power be considered apart from issues surrounding knowledge construction. These themes are brought together later in the chapter in the discussions of critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist theory's contributions to adult learning.

Race, Class, and Gender

Among the characteristics of people that provoke prejudice and oppression in American society, race, class, and gender are three of the most powerful and pervasive. The theoretical orientations discussed in this chapter place race, class, and gender and their interactions at center stage in analyzing the power dynamics and the distribution of resources in a particular context. The context can be defined as broadly as society, as an institution in society, or even as a specific adult education setting. The purpose in moving these issues to the foreground and analyzing systems of power and oppression, especially as they manifest themselves in adult education, is to bring about a more informed and democratic practice.

Race

While discussions of race focus primarily on African Americans, it should be noted that people other than White European Americans are also marginalized in our society. Native Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans all must grapple with discrimination and oppression based solely on their not being part of the White mainstream (Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Colin and Preciphs (1991, p. 62) define racism as “conscious or unconscious, and expressed in actions or attitudes initiated by individuals, groups, or institutions that treat human beings unjustly because of their skin pigmentation. ... Racism is expressed in attitudes, behaviors, and institutions.” The social impact of racism (and sexism) in America in economic terms is disturbing. The median income of

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White workers in 2003 was \$24,318 compared to \$19,794 for Blacks and \$17,974 for Hispanics (**U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004a**). It is also common knowledge that women of color are overrepresented in low-skill, low-paid jobs, such as health aide and private household worker.

That these disparities based on race also exist in the practice of adult education is no surprise. Participation patterns alone have consistently borne out the fact that Blacks and other people of color are underrepresented in all types of adult education. **Amstutz (1994)** has suggested three reasons why racism (and sexism) persist in adult education despite well-intentioned efforts. First, she sees a discrepancy between the rhetoric of adult education that speaks of empowerment and equal access, and actual behaviors that more often than not are “unempowering” and “traditional.” Second, most adult educators are themselves White and middle-class, have had little interaction with minorities of any kind, and have failed to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, prejudices, and biases. Third, she believes that most adult educators have an unwarranted faith in institutions, believing “that institutional practices are well meaning and that the policies under which their institutions operate are not biased” (p. 43).

The literature on multiculturalism has helped bring the issues of race and cultural diversity to the attention of educators at all levels. Even more recently, *critical multiculturalism* has emerged as “a term used to distinguish forms of multicultural education that specifically focus on challenging power relations based on *social structures* of race or culture, gender, class, etc. and on challenging the ‘isms’ that result from those power relations, as in racism, or sexism” (**Tisdell, 2005a**, p. 163; italics in original).

Multiculturalism appears to be synonymous with what **Guy (2005)** calls “culturally relevant adult education.” This educational approach attempts to “incorporate learners’ cultural practices and values in the teaching-learning process” (**Guy, 2005**, p. 180). Culturally relevant adult education sees the micro social level of educational practice as it relates to “broader socio-cultural and societal issues of power and difference” (p. 183).

For some, multiculturalism and even critical multiculturalism do not go far enough in addressing the racism that permeates our society. Critical race theory (CRT) takes a more radical perspective

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in that it tries not only “to understand the relationships among race, racism, power, privilege, and oppression, but to challenge and transform these relationships” (**Ianinska, Wright, & Rocco, 2003**, p. 176). Drawing from a number of disciplines, CRT acknowledges that race, a socially constructed category, is “a fundamental organizing principle in U.S. society,” that racism is systemic, and that “people of color have a unique voice in racial matters because of their social position and experiences with oppression” (**Jeris & McDowell, 2003**, pp. 188–189).

Ross-Gordon (1994) focuses on the intersections of race, class, and gender in reviewing the multicultural and critical pedagogy literature in order to extract elements of a multicultural pedagogy for adults. What this wide range of literature has in common, Ross-Gordon believes, is “an emphasis on deconstruction of hegemonic knowledge and structures, goals for emancipation of learners, and denial of claims to political neutrality for ... any form of education” (p. 315). Finally, she develops a composite of ten principles for teaching and learning, including sharing power with learners, fostering collaboration, challenging all forms of oppression, and placing the culture of the student in a central rather than a marginal position. With regard to racism in particular, she finds the “Afrocentric/anti-racist discourse ... unique in its concern with two concepts. One is the notion of centrality, that the student must find his or her culture to be central (not marginal) within the knowledge shared. Second is the emphasis on learning by teachers (or un-learning) through ... programs that educate them to recognize and challenge racism, including their own” (p. 316).

In an approach similar to Ross-Gordon's, **McDowell (2003)** identified eleven themes from the literature on antiracist praxis that adult educators can use to inform their own antiracist orientation. Some of her suggestions are as follows: becoming knowledgeable about race and racism, attending to racial awareness, interrogating White power, integrating racially diverse voices into curricula, and acquiring skills to challenge racism.

As race and ethnicity shape learning transactions in educational settings, so too in the workplace. **Ross-Gordon et al. (2005)** reviewed the work-related learning literature from the three domains of continuing professional education, human resource development, and workforce development with regard to concerns

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about race in each domain. While their findings varied somewhat across domains, they were able to draw the following conclusions:

1. Institutionalized discrimination affects individual careers and program directions; (p. 379)
2. Personal determination and resourcefulness, peer and family support, mentors, and social networks are especially important to the career advancement of racialized minorities ...; (p. 380)
3. Whites are generally less aware of manifestations of racism and benefits of White privilege (HRD and CPE) and in some cases demonstrate resistance to examining these (CPE). ... (p. 380)
4. A point of interconnection between HRD and CPE is seen in the degree to which literature focused on “cultural competence” was focused on the “helping” professions and organizations—those that require sensitivity to client perspectives in order to accomplish their “helping” goals/missions (p. 380).

Thus race not only permeates the workplace but all other aspects of our society as well, including adult education practice. Intertwined with race is socioeconomic class.

Class

When social class is the focus, the aim of the analysis and subsequent action is to bring about a change from a capitalist political economy to a classless socialist form of government. Drawing largely from Marxism, a class-based analysis emphasizes class struggle, alienation, and revolutionary activity. Workers find no connection or fulfillment through work; rather, the individual worker is but a cog in the production of goods and services, alienated from the self as well as others and society in general. It will be only through a revolutionary movement that this relationship between the person and his or her world can be changed. Freire (1970, p. 61) points out that those who are alienated are considered “marginal,” “a pathology of the healthy society. ... The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not ‘marginals,’ are not men [sic] living ‘outside’ society. They have always been ‘inside’—inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others.’ The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves.’” Thus

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a socialist Marxist framework for adult education would have, Youngman (1986, p. 197) suggests, the dual aims of challenging “the ideology and culture of capitalism” and developing “the general knowledge and technical expertise necessary to reorganise production and society in a fully democratic way.”

Perhaps due in part to the collapse of Eastern European communist and socialist states, strict Marxist analysis is no longer in fashion. Nevertheless, some adult educators argue for its continued relevance (Collins & Collard, 1995; Schied, 1993, 1994; Youngman, 1996, 2000). Schied (1994) acknowledges that feminist and postmodern thought have questioned making the working class “the privileged agent of change” (p. 445); indeed, “the primacy of social class has been strongly challenged by notions of gender, race, and colonialism.” In spite of this, “the economic dislocation and the exploitation of working people by international corporations is a reality. It is not merely constructed or read or produced by our theoretical perspective. This exploitation is real” (p. 446). Marxist analysis, if “conceived as a moral stance ... provides adult educators a way to place their practice in some kind of social context” (p. 446). Collins and Collard (1995) concur with Schied. A class-based economic analysis is particularly relevant in today's world, they say, with the “re-emergence of what amounts to class warfare in connection with global economic restructuring” (p. 75). It is time “to make connections between the home, the workplace, and the community—between class and concerns around culture, gender and race” (p. 75). This is in fact what Hart (1992, 1995) does in her Marxist-feminist analysis of work, gender, and class. Youngman (1996, p. 7) agrees, calling for a robust political-economic analysis: “The central issue for a transformative political economy of adult education is how to adequately conceptualize the interconnections between the four main systems of domination in society, namely, those deriving from imperialism, class, gender, and race-ethnicity. It is clear that while none of these systems is reducible to another (for example, the basis of women's oppression is different from that of class oppression), they do affect each other (so that, for example, women's oppression has a class dimension).” Holst (2002), who also argues for a reassessment of the Marxist tradition, is concerned that new social movements around feminism, antiracism, and sexual and environmental issues might eclipse the working-class struggle against capitalism.

Gender

While multiculturalists, Marxists, and critical theorists have brought inequities based on economics and class to adult educators' attention, feminist scholars have placed gender, and gender as it intersects with race and class, at the forefront of a critical analysis. Although all versions of feminist theory are concerned with the status of women worldwide, theorists differ among themselves on two counts: how the problem is framed and what needs to be done to change the status of women. Tisdell's (1995, 2005b) categorization of feminist theories into individually focused theories, structural theories, and postmodern theories offers a useful framework for reviewing these theories.

As the category suggests, individually focused feminist theories are concerned with women as individuals, how they have come to internalize patriarchy as the norm, and what needs to be done to obtain equal access, rights, and opportunities. Psychoanalytic feminists, for example, maintain that the male domination of women (patriarchy) is deeply rooted in men's and women's subconscious and is perpetuated through gender socialization. Change cannot come about unless people "deal with the patriarchy in their unconscious" (Tisdell, 2005b, p. 254).

In contrast to an individual focus, structural feminist theories frame the problem in terms of societal structures and institutions that oppress women. Marxist feminists argue that the two systems of capitalism and patriarchy, in conjunction with each other, oppress women. "Socialist feminists," Tisdell (2005b, p. 255) explains, "would agree that two significant and interrelated systems of oppression to women are capitalism and patriarchy, but they also discuss the importance of examining other systems of oppression such as racial oppression and the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation in women's lives." Cultural feminists extend this analysis to the experience of women of color who also represent a particular cultural group, such as Latina, Black, and Asian or Asian Americans (Tisdell, 2005b).

Postmodern theorists take issue with the unit of analysis, or how the problem is framed by structuralists. One or even two systems of power and oppression do not adequately capture the reality of women's experience and oppression because "some groups are more privileged than others within the particular structural

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unit or units of analysis. Thus Marxism does not account for the fact that men are more privileged than women; Marxist feminism does not account for the fact that white women have more privilege than women of color” (Tisdell, 1995, p. 61). Postmodernists also take issue with the structuralists’ overemphasis on locating power outside the individual. In a postmodern perspective, individuals have some power also—power to affect or resist the status quo. Postmodern feminist theories thus “tend to account for multiple systems of privilege and oppression and their intersections, along with people's capacity for agency or resistance” (p. 61). In this perspective, the “*connections between* individuals and social structures” (Tisdell, 2005b, p. 256; italics in original) and where one is positioned vis-à-vis multiple structures are the focus of analysis.

Power and Oppression

In addition to the intersections of race, class, and gender, a second theme underlying these contemporary approaches is that social inequities, including those found in education, stem from power-based relationships: “Those wielding power can control others in varying ways, getting them to engage in activities not in the powerless's best interest” (Hansen, 1993, p. 2). And “because power is constructed in and through social interactions, it is always alterable and disruptable, hence the importance of understanding and using power in adult education” (Wilson & Nesbit, 2005, p. 454). One of the major tasks of a critical analysis is to uncover and expose these power relationships wherein the domination of one group's interests results in the oppression of other groups. Power and oppression are concepts that permeate the thinking and writing of radical adult educators. As Nesbit (1998, p. 174) explains, “Radical educators regard the world and its constituent societies as full of contradictions and marked by imbalances of power and privilege. Hence, they regard such problems as poverty or illiteracy neither as isolated incidents nor as manifestations of individual inadequacy, but as results of larger social issues. Furthermore, individuals, as social actors, both create and are created by their social worlds.” Freire, for example, concluded that the Third World was “characterized by social, political, and economic oppression. ... The various forms of oppression constitute the concrete problems or contradictions

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that are the task of [a] revolutionary pedagogy” (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 155).

The identification of systems of power and oppression as a lens through which to analyze society is a key component of critical theory. Critical theory originated in the 1940s with the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School. With the advent of World War II, Habermas became disillusioned with Marxism, offering instead a view of society that is more optimistic, one that puts faith in the rationality of human beings to engage in critique and action to bring about a more just, free, and equitable society. The aim of critical theory, Welton (1995a, p. 37) writes, is “to help people to stop being passive victims who collude, at least partly, in their domination by external forces. Critical theory's liberating project is to name the enemies of human freedom, and to point to the possibility of freedom's enlargement.” Inglis (1997, p. 4) goes a step further in suggesting that an analysis of power leads to empowerment or emancipation: “Empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power.”

Of concern to those writing from this perspective is the appropriation of the “lifeworld”—our everyday personal interactions in home, family, and community—by the “system.” The system is conceived of as structures of power (institutions and organizations such as government) or the means to power (such as money in a capitalist economy, or knowledge in the information age). These systems have not only “colonized” the lifeworld but are oppressive: “Human beings as childrearers, partners, workers, clients, citizens, and consumers struggle against the process of being turned into objects of corporate and state management. Systemic imperatives, then, threaten to disempower men and women who have the capacity to be empowered, reflective actors” (Welton, 1993, p. 88). To fight the hegemony of the system (which includes corporate, government, legal, and media dimensions), citizens must engage in rational discourse about sources of power, knowledge, and oppression in the hope of redressing the current imbalance between the power of the lifeworld versus the system. Adult education can be a site for addressing power and oppression (Baptiste, 1998; Brookfield, 2005b; Rocco & West, 1998; Welton, 1995b).

Knowledge and Truth

The various schools of thought that make up what in this chapter we call a power relations perspective all address, to some extent, the nature of truth and the construction of knowledge. Each of the three major orientations discussed in the next section—critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist pedagogy—has a somewhat different notion of knowledge and truth.

The primary spokesperson for critical theory, Jürgen Habermas, proposed that there are three types of knowledge: technical, practical, and emancipatory. Technical knowledge has to do with the world of facts, of material things that structure our world. This knowledge can be easily verified through checking with documents, authorities, and so on. A statement such as “an adult can obtain a high school diploma through making an acceptable score on the GED” is technical knowledge. To say, however, that “a GED diploma is just as good as a high school diploma” moves us into the practical realm of knowledge, where communication with others—dialogue—is necessary to establish validity. The validity or truth of the claim is arrived at through dialogical consensus; interpretation, judgment, and sincerity are important here. Finally, a question such as “Why doesn't the GED diploma have the same status in our society as a high school diploma?” is emancipatory in nature because it addresses the forces of society that empower or disempower some individuals over others; that is, one would ask *who* has determined that a GED diploma has less status? *Whose interests* does it serve to maintain this status differential? Not all knowledge, then, serves the same interests, nor does all knowledge construction hold the same potential for challenging the status quo or emancipating the individual. Clearly, emancipatory knowledge has the most power to address the oppressive forces in society.

From postmodernism comes the notion that there is no single truth or reality independent of the knower. Postmodernism criticizes the modern conception of knowledge as a set of underlying principles that can explain behavior or phenomena across individuals or settings. In the modern world, what constitutes and what is accepted as knowledge is determined by power: “Modernism privileges some ideas and people(s); it marginalizes others” (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 49). Since “the goal

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of postmodernism is diversity/pluralism and its ethic is tolerance," knowledge "is either nonexistent or relative, and contradictory notions can all be considered equally true if locally held" (p. 49). Knowledge, then, is something that is part of the social and cultural context in which it occurs; how an individual or a community constructs knowledge and the type of knowledge constructed are socioculturally dependent. This view of knowledge goes hand in hand with how postmodernists view truth. There is no single, agreed-upon truth; there are many truths. This view leads to one of post-modernism's major strategies: deconstruction. As Hemphill (2001, p. 23) explains, if all truths are constructions, to deconstruct is "to uncover its [the term or concept's] evolution, unpacking the interests it serves and marginalizes." Further, postmodernism "encourages us to be critical of how knowledge is organized—whether in terms of broad disciplines or specific course curricula. All forms of organizing knowledge ... are contingent, occurring due to existing organizations and constellations of power in a given moment—and not given in some cosmic hierarchy" (Hemphill, 2001, pp. 26–27).

Feminists who write from a poststructuralist or postmodern perspective hold the same view about knowledge and truth. That is, they assume there is no one Truth, and each woman's truth or knowledge is relative to the sociocultural context of which she is part. Feminist theory encompasses two other views of knowledge construction, however. The psychologically oriented feminist literature has been heavily influenced by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986). From their interviews of 135 women, they identified five different ways women construct knowledge, ranging from silence to constructed knowing (see **Chapter Thirteen**). Their work suggests that knowledge is something that each individual constructs; the result of this process is a sense of individual empowerment, of gaining a voice along with the ability to effect change in their personal lives. In emancipatory feminist models, in contrast, knowledge is less personal. Drawing more from critical theory than psychology, these models "examine the political and social mechanisms that have controlled the knowledge production process and marginalized (or left out) the contributions of women and people of color" (Tisdell, 1995, p. 70).

In summary, assumptions underlying a power relations perspective on adult learning draw from a wide range of literature such as Marxist and feminist theory, critical race theory, multiculturalism,

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critical theory, and postmodernism. Any number of concepts and assumptions inform this perspective, but we chose three interlocking themes to set the stage for a discussion of contributions to adult learning from critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist theory/pedagogy. At the heart of all of these orientations is a critical assessment of the forces of economics, class, race, and gender that lead to systems of power and oppression. All also consider how knowledge is constructed and how the nature of its construction can liberate or dominate. We now turn to a more detailed discussion of critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist pedagogy, three of the contemporary perspectives that have had the greatest impact to date on adult learning.

Critical Theory and Adult Learning

In contrast to andragogy and even transformational learning, most practitioners in adult education are unaware of critical theory's potential for examining practice or illuminating the nature of adult learning. This is in part because the writing in this area is dense and obtuse, and operationalizing the concepts involved is difficult. Critical theory itself has been criticized for "asserting domination and reproducing a culture of silence in educational settings" due to its "technical jargon, obscure references, and ambiguous phrasing" (Pietrykowski, 1996, p. 84). In fact, we found only one article on critical theory in a practice-oriented publication. In "John's Story: An Exploration into Critical Theory in Education," deMarras (1991) demonstrates how John's failure to learn to read can be understood as a systemic social problem rather than one individual's failure. The "system" in a critical theory analysis is an institution (such as government or education) that functions to reproduce the status quo, in particular the existing social class structure. Awareness of this oppression can lead to resistance and possibly change. Critical theory's strength, as noted earlier, lies in its critique of existing economic and social structures and resultant power dynamics. However, "it is a discourse that often leaves practitioners frustrated" (Finger, 2005a, p. 168) in suggesting workable strategies for effecting change.

A number of adult education intellectuals have brought critical theory, and in particular Habermas's version, to adult education. Welton (1993, 1995b) has articulated the ways in which

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critical theory can inform adult education theory and practice. He identifies several concepts from critical theory that have affected and can continue to affect adult education: three types of knowledge, ideal conditions for reflective discourse, institutions as learning communities, and the interplay of the system and the lifeworld.

The three types of knowledge discussed earlier in this chapter—technical, practical, and emancipatory—present a framework for understanding and critiquing adult education as a discipline and as a field of practice. Collins (1991, 1995a, 1995b), for example, finds the field of adult education to be overly concerned with technical knowledge (with the least attention to emancipatory) at the expense of social action designed to bring about a more just and equal society. According to Collins, the field is too preoccupied with “professionalizing,” with “the cult of efficiency,” and with “an eagerness to serve the conventional professions” (1995a, p. 79). This preoccupation with the technical has both distorted learning and diverted adult educators from providing a “context where shared commitments [practical knowledge] towards a socially more free, just, and rational society will coalesce” (1991, p. 119). By this, Collins means that adult educators are too concerned with how to plan programs or arrange a classroom at the expense of considering why some adults do not have access to education, for example.

In a similar approach, **Wilson (1993)** and **Wilson and Hayes (2000b)** use the tools of critical theory to trace the rise of technical rationality and professionalism represented in the field's handbooks. These handbooks, which are published approximately every ten years, are encyclopedic compilations of essays describing the field of adult education. For the field to become professionalized, a body of knowledge needed to be compiled with which to train adult educators. “This is what the discourse in the handbooks represents. Without this basis in a scientifically derived body of knowledge, there would be no professional activity to transact in a service economy” (**Wilson, 1993**, p. 14). It was not until the 2000 handbook (**Wilson & Hayes, 2000a**) that a more critical stance was taken in assessing the body of knowledge in the field. Both Collins and Wilson fear that the grip of professionalism and technical rationality prevents the field of adult education from attending to social action and emancipatory interests.

Closely related to forms of knowledge is Habermas's ideal conditions for reflective discourse. Habermas has identified four

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criteria or conditions that, if applied to interactions among adults, should result in mature, rational, candid, “authentic” discussions: comprehensibility, sincerity, truth, and legitimacy. Mezirow (1995, pp. 52–53), who has adopted these conditions as central to his transformative learning theory, explains how these conditions work in discussions:

When we communicate or have doubts about the truth or authenticity of the assertion, the truthfulness of the speaker, or the appropriateness of what is asserted in light of relevant norms, we often seek the best judgment of the most informed, objective, and rational persons we can find. We engage them in a special form of dialogue which Habermas refers to as “discourse.” Discourse involves an effort to set aside bias, prejudice, and personal concerns and to do our best to be open and objective in presenting and assessing reasons and reviewing the evidence and arguments for and against the problematic assertion to arrive at a consensus.

These criteria can form a basis for identifying the skills that learners need to possess in order to engage in more authentic discussions. Mezirow and others realize that these are ideal conditions; nevertheless, they give us a standard to work toward in adult learning transactions.

Critical theory has also contributed to adult education in considering how institutions themselves can become learning communities. According to Welton (1993, p. 89), “Habermas believes that while all institutions are educative, not all are true learning communities. An institution, whether family, corporation, or state agency, may be organized to block free and noncoerced learning processes. Habermas encourages us to ask whether our institutions, large and small, truly enable human beings to unfold their potentials (cognitive, oral, technical, aesthetic) in their daily routine interactions.” Strategies to build learning organizations are efforts in this direction, as is the literature on classroom and planning practices that engage an emancipatory agenda (see **Ellsworth, 1989; Fenwick, 2005a; Gouthro, 2003; Schied, Carter, Preston, & Howell, 1997; Tisdell & Perry, 1997; Wilson & Cervero, 2001**). In view of this thinking, Welton (1995b, p. 151) even argues that the workplace has potential “as a site for emancipatory learning.” Critical adult educators have a “mandate ... to argue and struggle for

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workplaces that open up space for non-coerced, free communication pertaining to the organization, control and purposes of work” (p. 152).

Another contribution of critical theory to adult education, identified by **Welton (1993)**, is the notion of the interplay between the lifeworld and the system. As already noted, the lifeworld is the informal, everyday interactions of daily life, and the system consists of those structures based on money and power (corporations, government, education, and so on) that have an impact on the lifeworld. These systems do more than intrude into the lifeworld; they oppress. **Collins (1991, 1995a)** is particularly articulate about how forces from the system, such as expertise, competency-based curricula, and much of workplace learning, have disempowered adults in their lifeworlds. In his opinion, spaces in our everyday world where discussions of social and political issues and what can be done about them could occur have been taken over by systems that promote technical learning. Self-directed learning, for example, has been touted for its value in creating “professionals.” But

the idea of “facilitating” self-directed learning, which Knowles recognized ordinary wide-awake adults already possess (“to be adult means to be self-directing”), makes no more sense than comfortable pedagogical chatter about empowering people. For a critical perspective on adult education the initial task is to identify social structures and practices which (mis)shape social learning processes and undermine capacities adults already possess to control their own education. [**Collins, 1994**, p. 100]

For **Collins (1991, p. 119)**, critical practice means being engaged in “definable concrete projects for social change without which talk of justice, emancipation, and equality becomes hollow rhetoric.”

Since the lifeworld and the system are interrelated, there is some merit in focusing on the interaction of the two, from a popular movement standpoint or a systems perspective. “The juxtaposition of lifeworld and system concepts is clearly significant in enabling us to ‘think deeply and realistically about the systemic blockages to the achievement of a more fully democratized society’” (**Collins, 1995b**, p. 198). **Hart's (1995)** analysis of the workplace and the lifeworld of the family does just this, as does **Hill's**

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(1995, 1998) study of Pennsylvania citizens' groups engaged in environmental conflicts. The citizens' groups and the government regulatory agency "were both instrumental in community learning" and community conflict (1995, p. 163).

The most recent work in critical theory by an adult educator is by Brookfield (2001, 2002, 2005a, 2005b). He proposes a critical theory framework for a theory of adult learning and education. At the center of this theory of adult learning is ideological critique: "A critical theory of adult learning should have at its core an understanding of how adults learn to recognize the predominance of ideology in their everyday thoughts and actions and in the institutions of civil society" (2001, pp. 20–21). More specifically, there are seven "learning tasks" embedded in critical learning theory:

1. Challenging ideology. This is "the basic tool for helping adults learn to penetrate the givens of everyday reality to reveal the inequity and oppression that lurk beneath" (Brookfield, 2005b, p. 42).
2. Contesting hegemony. Hegemony is the notion that "people learn to accept as natural and in their own best interest an unjust social order" (Brookfield, 2005b, p. 43).
3. Unmasking power. "Part of becoming adult is learning to recognize the play of power in our lives and ways it is used and abused" (Brookfield, 2005b, p. 47).
4. Overcoming alienation. "The removal of alienation allows for the possibility of freedom, for the unmanipulated exercise of one's creative powers. As such, claiming freedom and overcoming alienation are inextricably intertwined" (Brookfield, 2005b, p. 50).
5. Learning liberation. Adults need to learn to liberate themselves, individually and collectively, from the dominant ideology.
6. Reclaiming reason. "A major concern of critical theory is to reclaim reason as something to be applied in all spheres of life, particularly in deciding values by which we should live, not just in areas where technical decisions are called for" (Brookfield, 2005b, p. 56).
7. Practicing democracy. Adults must learn to live with the contradictions of democracy, "learning to accept that democracy is always a partially functioning ideal" (Brookfield, 2005b, p. 65).

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We have illustrated how critical theory can inform both adult education theory and practice. However, as with any other theory, there are points of debate and critique. The notion that critical theory is a useful framework for better understanding adult learning has itself been critiqued. **Ellsworth (1989)**, in her now classic article on problems with applying an emancipatory, dialogic approach to the classroom, found that “key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely, ‘empowerment,’ ‘student voice,’ ‘dialogue,’ and even the term ‘critical’—are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (p. 298). In experimenting with a college class on racism, Ellsworth discovered that she and the students were ill equipped to handle the unequal power relations in their own classroom. She writes:

Our classroom was not in fact a safe space for students to speak out or talk back about their experiences of oppression both inside and outside of the classroom. ... Things were not being said for a number of reasons. These included fear of being misunderstood and/or disclosing too much and becoming too vulnerable; ... resentment that other oppressions (sexism, heterosexism, fat oppression, classism, anti-Semitism) were being marginalized in the name of addressing racism; ... [and] confusion about levels of trust and commitment surrounding those who were allies to another group's struggles. [1989, pp. 315–316]

Collard (1995) concurs with Ellsworth, arguing that discourse (the conditions of ideal speech) “merely reintroduces an old elitism under the guise of a communicative ethic” (p. 68). Further, the ideal speech situation “tends to disregard difference and exclude those who have no voice—i.e., it is implicitly hierarchical” (p. 65). We also feel that while critical theory allows us to uncover the use and abuse of power, it is a particularly challenging perspective to put into practice. How do we as adult educators actually go about promoting rational discourse, or help adults “learn to liberate themselves” (**Brookfield, 2005b**, p. 65), for example?

Despite these criticisms, critical theory remains a particularly important underpinning to theory building in adult learning. For example, Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation, discussed in **Chapter Six**, draws heavily from Habermas. Critical theory has

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also informed analyses of professionalization, power and oppression, and the dynamics of the teaching and learning transaction.

Postmodernism and Adult Learning

Uncertainty characterizes today's postmodern world. As Giroux (1992, p. 39) observes, "We have entered an age that is marked by a crisis of power, patriarchy, authority, identity, and ethics. This new age has been described, for better or worse, by many theorists in a variety of disciplines as the age of postmodernism." Unlike the modern world, which is characterized by "the scientific, industrial, and social programs, institutions, actions, and artifacts generated by the humanistic and Enlightenment search for the universal foundations of truth, morality, and aesthetics" (Bagnall, 1995, p. 81), in the postmodern era, things are much more diverse, fluid, illusionary, and contested, including the reality of the world itself. Identifying oppression, "defining the enemy" (Newman, 1994), and taking right forms of action are not so easy in a postmodern world. As Plumb (1995b, p. 188) observes, adult education from a "modern" world perspective "is poorly equipped to articulate how it can persist as a meaningful emancipatory practice without reinscribing itself as an institution that suppresses heterogeneity and difference." Newman (2006) however, is one writer who takes up this challenge, offering numerous strategies for social activists to channel their frustration, dismay, and anger into defiant action.

In a postmodern world, everything is "contested," up for grabs. What has been or is considered true, real, or right can be questioned; there are multiple interpretations depending on where one is standing and what factors are in juxtaposition with one another. There are no absolutes, no single theoretical framework for examining social and political issues. Hence, critical theory's goal of emancipation and overcoming oppression can itself be questioned because it represents a "logic" that "does not tolerate difference" (Pietrykowski, 1996, p. 90). At the same time, as Collins (1994, pp. 99–100) points out, postmodernism, in contrast to Habermasian critical theory, leaves us with no means of choosing "sensibly between one course of action and another. There is no truth to be found, only a plurality of signs, styles, interpretations, and meaningless process." Therefore, postmodernism can leave us with two almost diametrically opposed views. It can be seen as "offering a

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pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment ... of fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, meaninglessness" (Rosenau, 1992, p. 15). Or it can be seen as hopeful—a world that is “nondogmatic, tentative, and nonideological” (p. 16), one in which adult education can play a major role.

Exactly how postmodernism can play a “major role” in adult education is only recently being articulated. Kilgore (2004), for example, begins by analyzing the nature of postmodern knowing, including the notion of multiple truths, that meaning lies not in text but in its interpretation, and that power, inextricably linked to knowledge, is “something that we exercise rather than possess” (p. 48). She goes on to point out that at the heart of a postmodern pedagogy is a “shaking up [of] the social positions of teacher and student and the power relationship between them. Such aspirations will require us to consider the death of the teacher, the subversion of the student, and the diffusion of power” (p. 48).

Others have focused on the postmodern notion of the self and its importance in adult learning. The self in postmodern thought is not the unified, integrated, authentic self of modern times. Rather, the self is multiple, ever changing, and some say, fragmented. As Gergen (1991, p. 7) argues, “Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction. ... Each reality of the self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality.”

Such a notion of self has implications for adult learning and development. In an exploration of this question, Clark and Dirkx (2000, p. 112) find the notion of a unitary self “a little like trying to understand the universe by using a telescope with a fixed lens and position.” Clark (1997, p. 111) argues that “learning from the assumption of a unified self privileges the rational, agenic self and thereby fails to recognize and to give voice to other dimensions of the self.” A postmodern perspective of the self allows for “understanding, honoring, and fostering diversity” within the lives of our adult learners (Clark & Dirkx, 2000, p. 112). By extension, adult educators can be sensitive to “the noncognitive, emotive interests, inclination, and preferences of ... participants (Bagnall, 1999, p. 135). That is, aesthetic, spiritual, affective, and experiential aspects of the self become as important as the rational. McLaren (1997, p. 25) writes that educators need to assist students in dealing with the following questions of identity:

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How has the social order fashioned me in ways with which I no longer desire to identify? In what directions do I desire and why? To what extent are my dreams and my desires my own? What will likely be the consequences for me and others both like me and different from me? To what extent is society inventing me and by what moral, epistemological, political, or transcendental authority is this taking place? How am I to judge the world that made me and on what basis can I unmake myself in order to remake the world?

In the face of such a fragmented world, relationships, connectedness, and interdependence are the constants that hold us together. Finger (1995, p. 116) is explicit about moving to a collective action agenda to respond to

the new challenges. ... Experts must join groups of learners working collectively with real people on concrete problems. ... Teaching and preaching ready-made solutions to individuals must be replaced with collaborative, vertical, horizontal, and cross-disciplinary learning. Such learning must be recognized as probably the only "resource" still available to us to get through and out of the ever accelerating vicious circle. This, of course, must be a collective and collaborative effort, because there is no individual way out.

Postmodernists celebrate diversity among people, ideas, and institutions. By accepting the diversity and plurality of the world, no one element is privileged or more powerful than another. Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997, p. 22) speak of the advantages of this perspective:

Postmodernity has provided spaces for rising social groups such as the new middle classes, for new postmodern social movements and for hitherto oppressed and marginalised groups such as women, blacks, gays, and ethnic minorities to find a voice, to articulate their own "subjugated" knowledges and to empower themselves in a variety of different ways and according to their own specific agendas. In this situation, education stops being a univocal, predictable reality and consequently it makes no sense to speak of it simply as either functioning to reproduce the social order or as implicit social engineering, whether this be for domestication or liberation. ... Linked with this is the impact of a reconfiguration of education away from its institutional and provider-led location.

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Plumb (1995a, p. 246) observes that although so much fragmentation and diversity can be disempowering, it is also what is needed to challenge the equally disparate forces of oppression: "No longer is it sufficient to foster the emergence of a particular kind of identity sufficiently strong to overcome the inequitable norms of capitalism"; rather, "critical adult education must investigate new ways that identity can still productively be mobilized in the fragmenting environment of postmodernity."

Postmodernism has been criticized for its pessimism, its extreme relativism, its lack of a moral center. Furthermore, with few exceptions (see **Clark & Dirks, 2000; Kegan, 1994; Kilgore, 2004; Tisdell, 1995**), it comes up lacking on specific techniques or strategies for dealing with the postmodern classroom or adult education program. What postmodernism does offer adult education is a respect for diversity, a moving of previously marginalized groups into a position of equal value to other groups, and a critique (or deconstruction, some would say) of the categories by which we have labeled aspects of our practice. What does it mean to be categorized as illiterate in our society, for example? The marginalized groups identified by Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997)—women, blacks, gays, and ethnic minorities—have not found an advocate until very recently in critical theory, which is focused primarily on rationality, economics, class, and power. From postmodernity's challenges to modern, rational thought and society comes a valuing of diversity and opportunities inherent in uncertainty and nondogmatic practices. Postmodern discourses "offer a path—albeit a frustrating and convoluted one—to understand present and future phenomena that are no longer well suited to modernist, rational explanations" (**Hemphill, 2001, p. 27**).

Feminist Pedagogy and Adult Learning

As the name implies, feminist pedagogy focuses on the concerns of women in the teaching-learning transaction. Feminist pedagogy is derived from feminist theory, or more accurately, feminist theories. There are, for example, liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, Black, Marxist, and postmodern versions of feminist theory. Based in feminist theory, feminist pedagogy is "a method of teaching

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and learning employing a political framework that involves consciousness-raising, activism, and a caring and safe environment" (Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 57).

However, just as there are many feminisms, there are also numerous strands of feminist pedagogy that have been categorized in various ways. Maher (1987), for example, has placed the various perspectives into one of two categories: liberatory models and gender models. Liberatory models draw from postmodernism and Marxist and critical theory. From this perspective, the structures of society, the systems that intrude on our lifeworlds, oppress through their power and control. The structured nature of power relations and interlocking systems of oppression based on gender, race, and class are seen as being reinforced through education; that is, institutions of learning and the classroom itself reproduce the power structures found in society at large. Liberatory pedagogy examines how these systems of oppression are reproduced and resisted in education. We ask, for example, why White males tend to dominate a classroom discussion (reproduction), or why Black working-class women shun formal education (resistance). Liberatory feminist educators attempt to recover women's voices, experiences, and viewpoints and use these to make systems of privilege, power, and oppression visible. Although influenced by Freire's emancipatory praxis and Marxist theory, liberatory feminists are critical of the lack of attention in these approaches to gender and to interlocking systems of oppression based on gender, race, and class (Gouthro, 2003).

In the gender model of feminist pedagogy, the focus is on how female identity has been socially constructed to be one of nurturer and how the individual woman can find her voice, becoming emancipated in the personal psychological sense. Drawing from psychoanalytic and humanistic psychology, educators from this stance look to how the educational environment and the learning transaction can be constructed so as to foster women's learning. In this model, a connected approach to learning is advocated, where life experiences are valued, where a woman can come to have a voice, and hence, an identity. "If a woman is to consider herself a real knower, she must find acceptance for her ideas in the public world" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 220). The

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public world begins with a safe classroom where members can support and nurture each other. This connected environment will help women develop their own voices and see themselves as capable of being constructors of knowledge rather than just recipients. In their book *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing* (1996), Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky consider how to wed connected and separate knowing, what collaborative knowing might look like, and how color, class, and diversity affect women's learning.

Tisdell (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000) has moved feminist pedagogy forward by forging a synthesis of the liberatory and gender models that promotes both personal emancipation and public action. Tisdell first identifies four recurring themes in feminist pedagogy: how knowledge is constructed, the development of voice, the authority of the teacher and students, and dealing with differences. She finds the liberatory model particularly strong on recognizing differences based on race, class, and gender; nevertheless, such theories "focus too much on structures, and do not account for the individual's capacity for agency, the capacity to have some control outside of these social structures" (1996, p. 310). The gender or psychological model, in contrast, because it tends to emphasize similarities among women, does not much account for differences among women or differences in power relations based on race, class, sexual orientation, and so on. The way to take into account all four themes, Tisdell proposes, is through a poststructural feminist pedagogy, which weds the psychological orientation of the gender model with the structural factors of the liberatory perspective. Tisdell (1996, p. 311) explains:

A synthesis of these models in the form of poststructural feminist pedagogies would take into account both the intellectual and emotional components of learning, the individual's capacity for agency, as well as the psychological and social and political factors that affect learning. It would emphasize the importance of relationship and connection to learning, but also account for the fact that power relations based on a multitude of factors including gender, race, and class are always present in the learning environment and affect both how knowledge is constructed on the individual level as well as the social and political factors that affect what counts as "official" knowledge and how it is disseminated.

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Tisdell's poststructural feminist pedagogy model has several implications for the teaching and learning transaction. First, it speaks to differences among learners themselves: "Most women and some men may have different learning needs from men who represent the dominant culture" (1995, p. 73). Second, there is attention given to the role of power in the construction of knowledge itself—power's role in how knowledge is shaped and disseminated in the classroom, and in society at large. Third, a poststructural pedagogy, or what **Tisdell (1995)** also calls positional pedagogy, examines how "various positionalities—the gender, race, class, sexual orientation—of both the participants and the instructor matter and have an effect on the learning environment" (p. 75). Finally, this perspective problematizes the power and authority of the teacher and considers the ramifications of redistributing this power.

Tisdell's poststructuralist feminist pedagogy model highlights connections: connections between "the individual and the intersecting structural systems of privilege and oppression" and connections between "one's individual (constantly shifting) identity and social structures" (1998, p. 146). She suggests how these connections might lead to change in an adult learning setting:

As learners examine how social systems of privilege and oppression have affected their own identity, including their beliefs and values, the "discourse" is disrupted, thus shifting their identity, as well as increasing their capacity for agency. For example, if one has embraced societal prescriptions of particular gender roles (or race roles, or sexual roles that are exclusively heterosexual), and one becomes conscious of and examines the social construction of such roles, one's identity is likely to shift, and one could develop new ways of acting in the world. One also begins to see that there are different "truths" and perhaps not one "Truth," and that social systems have allowed members of privileged groups to control what has counted as "knowledge" in determining the official curriculum through the politics of the knowledge production process. [**Tisdell, 1998, p. 146**]

Weiler (1996) identifies three issues from which a feminist pedagogy can be forged. The first is the role and authority of the teacher. The tension between feminist teachers' need "to claim

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authority in a society that denies it to them” (p. 139) and the sharing of authority in the community of the classroom needs to be addressed. **Lee and Johnson-Bailey (2004)** point out the complexity of sharing authority when the instructor is both female and a person of color: “Instead of sharing our limited power and authority, we believe it is first essential to claim our power and authority in the class. Claiming this authority purposely is never easy, particularly when our students already see us as academic impostors or feel threatened by our position” (p. 62). Second, space needs to be made for personal experience as a source of knowledge and truth—how much space and what kind of space in regard to other sources of knowledge need to be negotiated. Weiler cites the Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde in articulating the challenge of incorporating feelings, “those hidden sources of power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes,” into the discourse around types of knowledge (cited by **Weiler, 1996**, p. 142). The third issue for Weiler is the question of difference. There is no unitary, universal women's experience on which to base a pedagogy of practice. Women who have been marginalized and oppressed by the dominant society, by the dominant female norms, have had very different experiences from those of the mainstream. “The turning to experience thus reveals not a universal and common women's essence, but, rather, deep divisions in what different women have experienced, and in the kinds of knowledge they discover when they examine their own experience. The recognition of the differences among women raises serious challenges to feminist pedagogy” (**Weiler, 1996**, p. 145). Brown, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey's (2000) study of race, gender, and teaching in the adult education classroom underscores Weiler's point. They found that “the practices of African American women postsecondary mathematics teachers are significantly affected by their race and gender ... dispel[ing] the myth of the universal teacher” (p. 286).

The work of Tisdell and Weiler is part of an expanding body of literature in adult education that addresses various aspects of adult teaching and learning contexts from a feminist pedagogy perspective. A number of writers have researched and presented guidelines for establishing collaborative and connected learning environments. **Stalker's (1993b)** feminist analysis of women teachers' mentoring women learners centers on women academics' location

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in a patriarchal system. **Stalker (1993a)** also examined sexual harassment in the adult learner–teacher relationship as a function of unequal power, authority, and control. Similarly, **Jarvis and Zukas (1998)** conducted a feminist analysis of teaching, research, and supervision in adult education, and **Bierema and Cseh (2003)** analyzed human resource development research from a feminist perspective. Finally, **Gouthro and Grace (2000)** use “positional” models of feminist pedagogy to analyze graduate women's experiences in adult and higher education. They conclude that these models can bring about a more relevant graduate experience for women that might include “changes in the goals and objectives graduate students set for themselves, changes in the time it takes to finish graduate school, altered student perceptions of the role and purpose of graduate education, and altered research interests and job and career ambitions” (p. 137).

With few exceptions, critical theory and postmodernism offer little guidance on how to manage the teaching and learning encounter to effect the theory's desired ends. There is much more in the feminist pedagogy literature, as the References indicate. **Lee and Johnson-Bailey (2004)** suggest the following strategies: using questioning and group debriefing, using technology to manage sensitive discussions, claiming authority as the instructor, facilitating the process of understanding new and contradictory knowledge, and selecting culturally diverse materials. Tisdell (1993, 1995, 1998) also includes the literature on multicultural education in her suggestions for creating inclusive learning environments:

- Integrate affective and experiential knowledge with theoretical concepts.
- Pay attention to the power relations inherent in knowledge production.
- Be aware that participants are positioned differently in relationship to each other and to the knowledge being acquired.
- Acknowledge the power disparity between the teacher/facilitator and the students.
- Identify all stakeholders and their positionality in the educational program.
- Consider the levels of inclusivity and the levels of contexts involved in the educational activity.

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- Consider how curricular choices implicitly or explicitly contribute to challenging structured power relations.
- Adopt emancipatory teaching strategies.
- Be conscious of the ways in which unconscious behavior contributes to challenging or reproducing unequal power relations.
- Build a community based on both openness and intellectual rigor to create a democratic classroom. [Tisdell, 1995, p. 90]

In summary, of the three theoretical orientations of critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist theory/feminist pedagogy reviewed in the second half of this chapter, feminist pedagogy has most directly addressed the practice of adult education and in particular the teaching-learning transaction in the classroom. Critical theory and postmodernism focus more on critique and questioning of the status quo. A few writers have attempted what **Grace (1996a)** calls “an eclectic theoretical scaffolding ... using insights from discourses including critical theory, feminism, and postmodernism” (p. 145). His model is based on several assumptions necessary for building an adult learning community. He suggests that actual classroom practices must acknowledge personal experience along with theoretical analyses through being sensitive to intersections of power “where race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, ableness, and age impact learning, life, and work” (1996a, p. 147), through conflict and dialogue, and through practices that are inclusionary of the diversity of peoples and their knowledge.

Summary

In this chapter we have presented an overview of several contemporary perspectives on adult learning, all of which deal with critique and power relations. The mound of writing and research, the plethora of viewpoints, and the complexity and density of language and concepts that make up this perspective have made this effort a daunting one. What we have done is to sketch the outlines, name some of the main concepts and players, and drawing from the work of colleagues in adult education, show how this perspective is shaping our understanding of adult learning and adult education practice.