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APEL: Pushing the Theoretical Boundaries

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A Review of:

Gender, Experience, and Knowledge in Adult Learning: Alisoun's Daughters
By Elana Michelson

This book by Elana Michelson is much more than a study of gender, experience and knowledge in adult learning! It is a *tour de force* weaving together ideas and concepts from, in the author's own words, "… the scholarship of multiple fields – from literary theory to critical anthropology to the history of seventeenth-century science …" (pp. 11-12). Indeed, in pursuit of social justice in education and beyond, the philosophical and theoretical reaches of the book embrace feminist theory, the politics of knowledge, post-colonialist and critical race theory, socio-materialism, post-structuralism, queer theory and more. Drawing upon and extending Michelson's work over the past 20 or so years, this volume crystallizes in very precise yet complex ways the author's longstanding commitment to the deconstruction and critique of contemporary discourses and "troubling assumptions" of "experiential learning" and the "experiential learner" which, she argues, frequently re-inscribe unexamined ideological, philosophical and epistemological principles, appearing more "progressive" than they actually are.

Meticulous, scholarly and forensic on the one hand, and deft, artful and literary on the other, the first two sections of the book, "The Politics of Experience" and "Gender, Experience, and the Body," re-evaluate theories of "experience" and the "self" before settling on the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) as a site of practice through which to refract the author's analyses and claims, in the book's third section, "Power and the Assessment of Experiential Learning." The final section of the book, "Narrating the Self," comprises more recent work, using literary analysis to revisit the "life narratives" that are so ubiquitous in APEL and adult learning.

Those familiar with Michelson's earlier work will probably (like me) have read – and reread – the three articles written in the mid-1990s that form the basis of Part I of this volume (Michelson, 1996a, 1996b, 1999). They were, to my knowledge, among the first scholarly attempts to bring materialist, post-structuralist, feminist, critical-race and post-modern thinking into critical relationship with the theories, concepts and models inherent in adult learning, experiential learning and APEL. I recall my own struggle to recast and reframe the "usual suspects" – experience, reflection and knowledge – in the terms she introduced. I was working in South African higher education at the time, embarking on some early APEL projects, in the immediate post-apartheid era. Michelson's history of experiential learning in the first part of the book is an extremely powerful reappraisal of the "folk heroes" of adult and experiential learning – David Kolb, Malcolm Knowles, Jack Mezirow, Paulo Freire and the rest. Although based on her earlier articles, Part 1 of the book is as fresh as it is clever and wide-ranging. Michelson defamiliarizes the familiar, namely the dualistic separations of mind

and body, reason and emotion, self and other, embodied and cerebral, auctoritee and experience. Hers is a far-reaching analysis of the understandings of experience, reflection and knowledge that are embedded and naturalized in most, if not all, education systems and practices.

In Part II of the book, Michelson brings new and important insights from feminist scholarship into dialogue with her reappraisal of mainstream theories of experiential learning. She started with the observation: "If there is any academic field that has devoted as much time as has adult learning to questions of experience, that field is feminist theory" (p. 57). In justification of this claim, Chapter 4 is a riveting analysis of the ideological and philosophical contestations around "experience" across 40 or so years of women's movements in North America and beyond. In many ways, it is the central theoretical chapter of the book in terms of demanding readers to "stake out a position within the debates" (p. 70), a challenge I duly take up first in relation to my own *personal* history, and secondly, in terms of my *academic* work. In doing this, I hope to illuminate and compliment/complement Michelson's work.

In terms of a *personal position,* in the Britain of the 1980s, I would have called myself a "radical feminist" and it was with more than a touch of nostalgia that I appreciated Michelson's weaving together of the many different strands and tendencies that characterized second-wave feminist debates and readings of "experience" at that time. I refer specifically to "celebrating the everyday and the relational," "the repudiation of male expertise," articulating the notion of internalized oppression, challenging scientific models of health and reproduction, returning to experience and the body as sites of knowledge production, reclaiming the night, building confidence through consciousness raising and (re)discovering "voice." And then the sobering realization some years later that "we" (mainly white, middle-class, Western women) were essentializing particular female qualities and ignoring broader class, race and cultural dimensions. With the benefit of hindsight and my own academic study and work, I can now see that my "radical feminism" was a social(ist) theory of *identity*, one in which the experiences and perspectives of women were automatically accorded epistemic authority, or, as Michelson put it, were taken as representing "unmediated access to a truer reality" (p. 69). At the end of Chapter 4, "Body, Culture, and the Feminist Claims for Experience," Michelson moves into a pivotal set of debates concerning how feminist epistemologists have shifted such thinking away from the counter-valuing of the "dual vision" or "outside inside" knowledge of the marginalized.

This is an important corrective in my view, one that, as Michelson wrote, salvages "more conventional beliefs concerning objectivity, reason, and method" (p. 68). To contextualize (hopefully without over-simplifying), pre-Kuhnian positivism emphasized realism, rules, empirical observation and the scientific method. Science was seen as *the* way to deduce truth and understand the world – so as to predict and control it. Post-positivism is an incredibly broad term, opening up a totally different worldview and new ways of thinking about the relationship between researcher and researched, the role of theory and the nature of knowledge. All post-positivist thinking breaks from positivism, but to varying degrees and in particular ways. I want to "hold" and develop Michelson's point about "objectivity, reason and method," and to do so by "staking out" my second position - my *academic position.*

In common with a number of colleagues in the sociology of education, I have been drawn to social realism and the "knowledge question" in my work around APEL (see Harris, 2006; Cooper & Harris, 2013, for example). Taking the social production of knowledge as the starting point, the emphasis is on knowledge production in disciplinary or other specialized research communities. There is a very real sense here that knowledge is not *only* socially constructed, it also has intrinsic epistemological characteristics such as "generalized categories," explanatory functions and modes of evaluation (Young, 2008). Put another way, knowledge has internalist dynamics with a related logic (or logics) through which it grows and develops. This renders

relationships with so-called “everyday” knowledge problematic. The argument is that access to this specialist knowledge or “powerful knowledge” is itself an issue of social justice (Young, 2008; Wheelahan, 2010); and that, in the interests of educational equality, all learners should have access to it. “Powerful knowledge” does not refer to the knowledge of the powerful, although as various commentators have pointed out, it is no surprise that “the powerful” take full advantage of this knowledge. It is seen as providing some of the tools required for overcoming powerlessness. Indeed, a condition of educational disadvantage is very often unequal access to these key epistemic resources: to certain kinds of information, to the particular sets of analytical skills acquired through formal education, and to a range of formal theoretical and analytical concepts.

This is not to say that education and access to specialist knowledge can compensate for all of society’s ills. Nor is it to say that the knowledge practices of the academy do not need to be interrogated for their (often very well-hidden) power effects, especially concerning class, race and gender in an uneven world. It *is* to say – given that adults enter higher education for a variety of reasons (well-rehearsed in the lifelong learning and APEL literature) – that we need to know exactly what they want and why they might be interested in credit for their prior learning. Is the latter only an instrumental means to gain a qualification quickly, or is there some more intrinsic motivation? Isn’t it likely that adult learners want access to new specialized knowledge beyond what they know already, i.e., higher levels of epistemic access and success? Are we at risk of holding them back with an extensive retrospective preoccupation with skills and knowledge they have learned in the past?

Maybe I want my epistemological cake and eat it, too? I advocate a social realist appreciation of disciplinary and formal knowledge, *and also* the space to be there for the recognition and curricular and pedagogic incorporation of valid knowledge produced in collectively defined social locations – which, after all, is likely to be hybrid knowledge containing elements of powerful knowledge put to work in different ways and contexts. Michelson’s position is stronger on the latter than the former. Maybe there are ways to hold these two dynamics in a creative tension? At times Michelson achieves this, at other times she does not. In Part III of the book there is a tendency to dichotomize and collapse everything to do with academia and academic/powerful knowledge into a caricature of logical positivism. So, rather than representing some of the best that has been thought by theorists in the natural sciences, social sciences and human sciences, all academic knowledge is presented as founded upon “masculinist and European-normed epistemologies that value abstract observation” (p. 7).

At her sharpest and best, however, Michelson *does* hold the two dynamics in ways that reflect cutting-edge “interactionist” thinking in feminist theory (Nancy Tuana as cited in Michelson, 2015, p. 69), where materialist alternatives to both realist and social constructivist understandings of the world and knowledge practices are debated through a practice of inquiry that seeks to carefully account for how such knowledge is created, legitimated and used by individuals in particular socio-material contexts. This is not contextual or “everyday” knowledge in any narrow sense; it refers to shared rule systems in lifeworlds, which, it is claimed, in consort with formal knowledge, actually strengthen rather than reduce objectivity. This is delicate and important philosophical footwork especially when it comes to social justice and APEL (see Zipin, Fataar and Brennan [2015] for similar perspectives drawing upon the work of social theorist Nancy Fraser). As long as the complexity of social positions and claims to valid knowledge[s] do not retreat into relativism by default, this to me is well on the road to having my epistemological cake and eating it, too!

Continuing with what all of this means for APEL, Michelson makes an important new departure in arguing that APEL practices need to be seen as qualitative research, or at the very least, as affording a “qualitative dimension,” especially in relation to recognizing workplace learning. Following Silvia Gherardi, an expert in

organizational knowledge, workplace learning and practice studies, Michelson posited that APEL practices should start "not with academic norms," but with candidates' "complex system[s] of networks consisting of material, social, discursive, technological, and organizational relationships" (p. 131) and with their "complex interactions across socio-material and discursive fields" (p. 132). She aimed for a view of workplace practice as consisting of multiple knowledges that are intellectual, discursive, social, aesthetic, and moral as well as "applied," and she is, in my view, completely correct in claiming that this combination is often more complex than "pure theory." As she argued, "[i]n the workplace, theory cannot be separated from practice, or knowledge from activity, because theory reveals itself in what is accomplished …"; "[t]he knowledge that counts in the workplace is not theory per se" (p. 129).

Starting with an almost ethnographic approach to APEL candidates' knowledge and networks is an excellent proposition, and Michelson illustrates it with reference to a wide variety of different types of power-sensitive questions that could be asked within APEL practices; questions that do not rely on Modernist dualisms; questions that draw on her superb recent work on life narratives (in Part IV [Narrating the Self] of the book); questions that "establish the efficacy of particular, effective ways of doing things in particular sites of engagement" (p. 121); questions that require contextually appropriate "analytic conceptualizations and informed conclusions" (p. 133). Such approaches would add enormous value to our understandings of the nature of the knowledge generated in and through networks of practice and engagement. Academics, and APEL practitioners, as Michelson argued, may begin to appreciate "the efficacy of particular forms of knowledge when applied to particular kinds of inquiry, activity, or circumstance" (p. 121).

But it cannot stop there. Even rich ethnographic accounts of experiential learning/knowledge and workplace practices have to be brought into relationship with some notion of academic knowledge and formal education, both for accreditation purposes and for those adults wanting further access to specialized knowledge to enhance their life chances and livelihoods. To unpack that relationship, in my view, we need to address the nature of curriculum, particularly curriculum goals. Social realism offers helpful conceptual tools for this, following Bernstein's (2000) analysis that curriculum-making involves selections of formal knowledge "re-contextualized" into particular sets of arrangements for teaching and learning purposes. This process is described in two modes. Both modes are sites of ideological struggle over what counts as legitimate knowledge in the first place, what knowledge gets to be re-contextualized into curricula, and what happens subsequently in the pedagogic space of teaching and learning.

In the first mode, selections from disciplinary knowledge are adapted, recast, reorganized, simplified, sequenced, exemplified, and paced for teaching and learning and assessment in discipline-based subjects. This mode then, refers to the "move" from disciplinary knowledge to the curricula of academic subjects in both natural and social sciences. The second mode refers to the design and construction of applied, vocational and professional educational programs. Here, Bernstein theorized that disciplinary knowledge, often from more than one discipline, is selected in a similar way to the first mode, but in addition, is brought into relationship to varying degrees with "the operational demands of workplace activities" (as cited in Barnett, 2006, p. 146), "having regard to the technological or organizational problems encountered in specialized work settings" (p. 147). Hence, curricula are more outward looking, or as Barnett (2006) put it, they try to "face both ways" – to bodies of knowledge (for academic progression) and to fields of practice in occupations or groups of occupations (for relevance to the world of work) (p. 152). This second mode, then, refers to a more complex set of "moves" in terms of curriculum design. As an example, a multidisciplinary program in nursing might draw upon disciplinary knowledge from the natural and social sciences, oriented to the world of work, to greater or lesser extents across particular courses or modules, and taking account of the requirements of regulatory bodies. This is how the knowledge bases of traditional professions, such as engineering and medicine, and

the newer professions such as management, business and media studies, are assembled. It is not, as Michelson claimed it is, all about static and "abstract knowledge" (p. 129). It is about theory plus the complexities of workplace environments and labor market logics.

At its best then, APEL provides the space for creative mediation between adults' prior knowledge and specialist knowledge, to the benefit of both, potentially. This is resonant with the idea of APEL as "specialized pedagogy" – the focus of a recently completed four-year research project in South Africa (Cooper & Ralphs, forthcoming) – where it is claimed that APEL practitioners engage pedagogically with "the hybridised discourses of experiential learning as well as the more or less strongly bounded discourses of the academy or the occupational qualification." Too much attention to one side or the other risks social and epistemological exclusion, albeit in different ways. Optimal social inclusion lies in the mediation between the two – in the direction of specialized knowledge. In my view, this is the only way to "do right by the students."

Elana Michelson is a passionate specialist in this area and that comes across strongly. Her contribution to the field is immense. She has done more than anyone to push the scholarship and philosophical and theoretical boundaries around APEL. In this volume, at the outset, she invites us as readers to journey with her to trace the ways in which "'experiential learning' became constrained within the normalizing structures and ideologies of the emerging economic and political order" (pp. 17-18). It is a strong calling. It excites and incites. I urge all APEL practitioners and scholars to experience this book in order to deepen and broaden all of our understandings of what we do, and more importantly, why we do what we do. For those who are teachers and lecturers, I think it would make a very good reader, to introduce post-graduate students to the theoretical lenses associated with feminist, critical-race and post-structuralist thinking with APEL playing the role of case study. Chaucer's Alisoun would be pleased. Well-pleased.

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