

WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION: TO CHANGE SOCIETY OR TO FIT INTO IT?

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Facilitators at the Coady International Institute usually posed the question in the title early in the five-month *Diploma Program in Development Leadership*, and it invariably generated lively discussion among participants. The question challenged the recent neoliberal philosophical shift in universities toward training students for professional positions and corporate competitiveness, and away from engaging them in constructing a more democratic and egalitarian society.

The challenge for adult educators today, particularly those working in university settings, is to decide where they stand on the question and what their role will be. Often there is tension between an academic approach that remains neutral and focuses on “expert” knowledge about managing development, compared to one that aims to develop individual critical thinking and motivate collective action around development issues of common concern, both locally and globally.

The Coady is grounded in the social justice values and principles of the Antigonish Movement — primacy of the individual, social reform through education, education begins with economic and group action, effective social reform involves change in economic and social institutions, ultimately to achieve a “full and abundant life for all.”¹ For adult educators at the Coady, the answer has been to enable change in society by offering courses that motivate the active participation of aware citizens in the decisions that affect their lives. Transformation was not seen as a technical issue, but a political and philosophical one.

Ian Martin calls this taking “principled positions” as adult educators who acknowledge the social purpose of education is “to contribute to change towards more social justice, more equality and more democracy.” He identifies the following characteristics of social purpose adult education:

- “Adult learners are treated as citizens and social actors;
- Curriculum reflects shared social and political interests;
- Knowledge is actively and purposely constructed to advance these collective interests;
- Pedagogy is based on dialogue rather than transmission;
- Adult education exists in symbiotic relationship to social movements;
- Critical understanding leads to social action and political engagement;
- Education is always a key resource in the broader struggle for social change.”ⁱⁱ

The social purpose of education at the Coady became more explicit and intentional in the late 1980s, influenced by radical adult educators such as Paulo Freireⁱⁱⁱ, who saw education or “conscientization” as “political ... there can be no neutral position. To sit on the fence is to take the side of the status quo.” For Freire, the social purpose must always be “explicit and purposely fully acknowledged” in an educational setting.

For us, as Coady facilitators, this translated into a written pledge to participants introduced in 2005 and shared at the beginning of the five-month Diploma^{iv}. In it we pledged to commit ourselves to:

- Respectful, just, empowering teaching methods;
- Genuine and reciprocal learning relationships;
- Reflective practice and creative expression;
- Divergent opinions;
- A supportive yet challenging space for learning;
- Challenging paradigms that promote inequality and inequity;
- Modeling and mentoring; and
- Integrity.

During the *Foundation in Development Leadership* course, adult educators such as Drs. Wilf Bean and Thomas Turay engaged participants in seeing their lives in a broader context, using the ideas of eco-philosopher Joanna Macy as a starting point for discussion. The three dimensions of Macy’s The Great Turning initiative provided learners with an approach to understanding what is needed to create a sustainable shift in society:

- Holding actions to slow the damage to earth and its beings;
- Analysis of structural causes and the creation of structural alternatives;
- A shift in consciousness and spiritual awakening.^v

Using a participatory teaching and learning approach, course facilitators created different spaces for participants to share and reflect on their experience, to cultivate and challenge world views, to co-create new knowledge, articulate alternative visions, and to connect personal change with wider organizational and societal change. This often meant using various experiential methods to explore individual understandings of concepts such as gender, power, globalization, oppression, identity, human rights, social justice, and how they

ⁱ Coady, M.M. (1939). *Masters of their Own Destiny: The story of the Antigonish Movement of Adult Education through economic cooperation*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.

ⁱⁱ Martin, I. (2001). A note of unfashionable dissent: rediscovering the vocation of adult education in the morass of lifelong learning. Paper presented at SCUTREA, 31st Annual Conference, 3-5 July, University of East London.

ⁱⁱⁱFreire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Herder and Herder.

^{iv} From 1987 to 2018 the duration of the Diploma varied from 5 to 6 months.

^v Macy, J. and Brown, M. (1998). *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*. Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers.