

# **RoboEd: Re-imagining Adult Education**

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that cultural images created by the mass media can form the basis of a postmodern critical pedagogy that is accessible to those unfamiliar with the discourse and tradition of critical theory. The image of *RoboCop* is used to generate a critique of the technicization of adult education in North America.

**Resumé:** Cet article étudie comment les 'mass media' crée les images de la culture desquelles on peut former la base pour une pédagogie critique et postmoderne qui est accessible celles qui ne sont pas familiar avec ni la langue ni la tradition de la pensée critique. Les auteurs usent l' image de *RoboCop* pour produire une critique contemporaine de l' education des adultes en Amerique Nord.

## ***Critical Adult Education***

In recent years, adult educators working within the critical paradigm, for instance Michael Collins (1987, 1988, 1991) Mechthild Hart (1985, 1990a, 1990b), Collard and Law (1989), Jack Mezirow (1985, 1990), and Michael Welton (1987a, 1987b, 1990), have made significant contributions to the field of adult education. Unfortunately, because these contributions are developed within a realm of discourse peculiar to the critical theory tradition, they often remain inaccessible to those adult educators outside the critical community. If forms of critical pedagogy are to inform the practice of adult education, some way of making them accessible to those outside the universe of critical discourse must be found.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we contend that certain pervasive images created by the mass media have the potential to form the basis of a postmodern critical pedagogy that is readily accessible to those outside of and unfamiliar with the discourse of the critical tradition. The advent of such a "critical postmodernism signals the possibility for not only rethinking the issue of educational reform but also creating a pedagogical discourse that deepens the most radical impulses and social practices of democracy itself" (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991, p. 187). In support of our position, we will demonstrate how an image that has permeated North American popular culture—*RoboCop*—can be employed to initiate a critical analysis of the dominant pedagogical practices that suffuse adult education in twentieth-century North America.

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<sup>1</sup> Pedagogy, here, refers to those ideas and activities that facilitate and promote the acquisition of *Paideia*—culture, education, and knowledge combined; see M. J. Adler (1982). *The paidea proposal: An educational manifesto*. New York: MacMillan.

## ***Realms of Discourse***

A realm of discourse refers to those practices and conventions of a community that make linguistic and extra-linguistic communication possible. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe explain realm of discourse as follows:

Let us suppose that I am building a wall with another bricklayer. At a certain moment I ask my workmate to pass me a brick and then I add it to the wall. The first act—asking for the brick—is linguistic; the second—adding the brick to the wall—is extralinguistic. Do I exhaust the reality of both acts by drawing the distinction between them in terms of the linguistic/extralinguistic opposition? Evidently not, because, despite their differentiation in those terms, the two actions share something that allows them to be compared, namely the fact that they are both part of a total operation which is the building of the wall. So, then, how could we characterize this totality of which asking for a brick and positioning it are, both partial moments? Obviously, if this totality includes both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, it cannot itself be either linguistic or extralinguistic; it has to be prior to this distinction. This totality, which includes within itself the linguistic and the non-linguistic, is what we call discourse. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990, p. 100)

Since the context or social space determines the meaning of linguistic and extra-linguistic acts, forms of communication *across* realms of discourse tend to break-down. Adult educators outside the realm of critical discourse have difficulty with the language of the critical tradition because they are unfamiliar with the conventions and practices that give meaning to that language

There are, of course, many realms of discourse, even within the field of adult education. For instance, those adult educators who ground their pedagogy in the liberal arts have a set of practices and conventions in common, as do those who ground their pedagogy in psychology and technology. This is not to suggest these educators cannot communicate to one another. As well as being members of academic communities, they are also members of other communities, for example, neighbourhood communities, religious communities, and ethnic communities. This allows communication in general, but just as the Christian does not understand the traditions and practices of Islam, adult educators well versed in technology or the humanities do not understand the practices and conventions of social theory that inform the critical tradition.

### ***A Regime of Signification.***

The development of new technologies, however, has enabled the mass media—particularly the visual media of television and cinema but also the print media—to construct images that permeate all existing social spaces. This new mode of communication, wherein market-driven images seek to eradicate social differences to maximize consumption, is not a realm of discourse but a “regime of signification.” This postmodern mode of communication “de-differentiates” society, dissolving the barriers of

convention and tradition that differentiated social spaces from one another. While images replace words, their rapid proliferation is such that signifiers soon far outnumber the concepts—"signifieds"—they once represented (Lyotard, 1984, 1988). The result is a fleeting and fragmented world of images that represent not signifieds but other signifiers, making meaningful communication all but impossible. Ironically, while the postmodern regime of signification eradicates differences, it introduces the possibility of a unified critique of its homogenizing and totalizing tendencies. While an incisive critique of capitalism's market-driven, homogenizing tendencies has long existed in critical theory, only now, with the advent of a regime of signification, is this critique readily accessible to adult educators outside the critical tradition.

### ***The Possibility of a Critical Postmodernism***

Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) contend that while postmodern pedagogies accept the transition from discursive to figurative modes of communication, this need not commit them to accepting the conditions of contemporary society unquestioningly:

The "nihilism" of postmodern discourse does not signify its rejection of ethics, politics, and power, only its refusal to accept the givens of public and private morality and the judgments arising from them.... Postmodernism provides a political and pedagogical basis not only for challenging current forms of academic hegemony but also for deconstructing conservative forms of postmodernism in which social life is merely made over to accommodate expanding fields of information in which reality collapses into the proliferation of images. At its best, a critical postmodernism signals the possibility of not only rethinking the issue of educational reform but also creating a pedagogical discourse that deepens the most radical impulses and social practices of democracy itself. (p. 187)

Critical postmodern pedagogies link education to democratic public life, define educators as engaged, sentient agents, and seek to incorporate difference, plurality, and everyday life into the education process. This, of course, is to view "education as a form of cultural politics, a discourse that draws its meaning from the social, cultural and economic context in which it operates" (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991, p. 187). As such, critical postmodern pedagogies call for a dramatic reevaluation of the theories that inform education.

While critical theorists have long understood cultural images "in terms of existing social relations" (Lash, 1990, p. 154), such analyses for the most part, have remained inaccessible to those outside the critical realm of discourse. One critical theorist in particular, Walter Benjamin, points out the radical potential of emergent cultural forms. In observing the modernization of Paris, Benjamin noted that while the homogenization of existing cultural forms—arcades and faubourgs—destroyed the radical potential that lay in the differences of these social spaces, the creation of new cultural forms—cinema and radio—introduced new radical possibilities to Parisiennes (Lash, 1990).

Consequently, the process of de-differentiation is comprised of two moments: one destructive and one creative. Our contention is that while the images of the mass media threaten to erode the critical power of specialized forms of discourse, such as critical theory, they also present a radically new opportunity for a critique of postmodern society. With this in mind, we turn now to perhaps the most powerful of all the visual media—cinema.

### ***RoboEd: A Postmodern Critique.***

The image of *RoboCop* is familiar to most North American adults, whether they have seen the *RoboCop* motion pictures or not. Consequently, the figure of that invincible amalgam of titanium and human tissue lies waiting to be evoked in our minds. The meaning of the image is not fixed, however, and it is this ambiguity that allows the image to form the basis of a critique. *RoboCop* represents both the promise and peril of technology. The promise of technology, on the one hand, is the effective and efficient control of our world. We revel in *RoboCop*, the machine's, ability to triumph over subversion and enforce the law. The peril of technology, on the other, is the subjugation of human values to technical imperatives. The cold and alien nature of technology is masked by *RoboCop*'s human form. The image retains a semblance of humanity, allowing us to vicariously share in *RoboCop*, the machine's, trials and tribulations. But while *RoboCop*'s anthropomorphism permits us to experience the triumph of machine over man, it also allows us to sense *RoboCop*, the human's, struggle to transcend the programming that determines his actions.

The ambiguous potential of technology, so powerfully represented in the image of *RoboCop*, is also present in the modern practice of adult education. In the first instance, audiences revel in *RoboCop*'s ability to effectively assess **all** situations, identify the most **efficient** means to bring about change, and **unequivocally** evaluate outcomes. In the second, adult educators exult in the ability of modern educational practices to effectively assess adults' needs in **all** situations, identify **efficient** means to bring about "desired" change, and **unequivocally** measure learning outcomes. Lacking a critical perspective, many adult educators fall prey to the allure of technicized forms of education. The technical imperatives of effectiveness, efficiency, and quantifiability determine the worth of education programs. "Good" programs proceed scientifically and objectively, from precisely identified needs, through clearly defined objectives, to readily quantifiable results. The step from *RoboCop* to **RoboEd** is a small one.

Yet, just as performative contradictions impel *RoboCop* to re-examine his programmed directives, causing him to reflect upon the emotional and moral factors that once influenced his actions, performative contradictions in the modern practice of adult education can lead adult educators to reflect upon the imperatives that inform technicized education. *RoboCop* comes to realize that the source of his power—technology—carries a price: technology allows him to reign over others, but it is technology that rules supreme. *RoboCop*'s ultimate battle is the fight to regain his very humanity—control of

his will. It is his will to power—to be self-determining—that leads *RoboCop* to risk his very being in order to salvage his humanity.

Critical adult educators contend that education informed by technological imperatives—**RoboEd**—does not serve the interests of humanity. It serves, rather, the interests of impersonalized systems of power that threaten the destruction of all that is human. They ask us to think about who benefits from technicized forms of adult education. They ask us to become reflective, not unlike *RoboCop*, and to resist the technologies that we use to reign over our students.

The image of *RoboCop* reintroduces the question of *values*. It offers us a perspective from which to critique “neutral” educational practices based on effectiveness and efficiency. It allows us to analyze the role of educators as will-less implementers of curriculae—over which they have little or no control—devised to meet the imperatives of the marketplace. It urges us to reject the notion of education as a commodity whose value is determined by autonomous laws of supply and demand. And finally, the image of *RoboCop* compels us to recognize the crucial difference between “means” and “ends” rationality. Now, more than ever, adult educators must be willing to ask what the purpose of adult education should be, rather than how adult education can proceed more effectively and efficiently:

At a time when the furthestmost corner of the globe has been conquered by technology and opened to economic exploitation; when any incident whatever, regardless of where or when it occurs, can be communicated to the rest of the world at any desired speed; when the assassination of a king in France and a symphony concert in Tokyo can be “experienced” simultaneously; when time has ceased to be anything other than velocity, instantaneousness, and simultaneity, and time as history has vanished from the lives of all peoples; when a boxer is regarded as a nation’s great man; when mass meetings attended by millions are looked on as a triumph—then, yes then, through all this turmoil a question still haunts us like a specter: What for?—Whither?—And what then? (Heidegger, 1959, pp. 37-38)

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