

**Ayers, W., Heller, C., & Hurtig, J. (2016). *Every Person is a Philosopher: Lessons in Educational Emancipation from the Radical Teaching Life of Hal Adams*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc. Pages: 152. ISBN: 978-1-4331-1937-7 (hardcover), 978-1-4331-2936-0 (paperback), 978-1-4538-1637-7 (e-book)**

Reviewed by: Lyndze Harvey, University of Victoria

When students of education, or professionals within the field, encounter the works of Paulo Freire, C.L.R. James, bell hooks, or other radical educators and their philosophical understandings of the state of education and the call for the educative to become liberatory, a connection to our practice and the people with whom we work can be challenging to identify. For teachers trying to move toward a practice of freedom, one in which students and teachers “become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 78), some elements of such proposed praxis remain uninterpreted in part because they do not seem relevant to mainstream classrooms. While alternatively there are features of these critical pedagogies that are reinterpreted by depoliticizing their approach to make them more palatable to prevailing expectations of education. *Every Person is a Philosopher: Lessons in educational emancipation from the radical teaching life of Hal Adams*, edited by William Ayers, Caroline Heller, and Janise Hurtig (2016), is a book of essays that attempts to connect a revisionist and humanizing philosophy of education with teaching practice. Along with an introduction to radical educator Hal Adams, and some of his own writing regarding his pedagogy of ordinary thought, the chapters of this book include essays that explore his inspiring take on the politicized of the educative and the possibility for the emancipation of all involved.

Drawn from the words of influential political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971), Adams’ teaching approach to education is based on the belief that every person has a story to tell and that, through the word, every person is capable of thinking philosophically and participating politically in the world (Ayers et al., 2016). This empowering thought is not just expressed persuasively but also demonstrated through reflection and narrative; without prescription, the book’s chapters examine and exemplify an approach to teaching that is beyond progressive efforts to level the teacher-student dichotomy, but rather uses stories to illustrate the ways in which our teacher identity gets in the way of liberatory practice. Written and edited by contemporaries in the field, including classroom and community educators, the selected essays continue the conversation surrounding ongoing struggles of class, race, gender, and other facets of inequality in Western experiences, and the remaining stark urgency for subversive and critical education. The book’s overall thesis suggests that through writing and sharing, and the empowering experience of humanizing praxis, we encounter a gateway to locating ourselves as political beings and that this promotes and supports activism as well as participation in a democratic society.

A participant from one of the writing groups that Adams began, located in a systemically marginalized and impoverished neighbourhood in Chicago, explained that she and others involved “come to share, not to learn” (p. 35). At first, this statement may be off-putting to the educator, especially one whose approach is located within dominant pedagogy, but upon further consideration as well as contemplation of Freirian problem-posing practice, the student’s assertion is evidence of the way in which a teacher who has the “self-discipline” to enter

into the classroom in the capacity of participant, and “relinquish the seductive authority of her designated role to dialogic equality” (p. 41), can create space for emancipation. It is this act of *sharing*, which is thematic throughout the essays in this book, that is so impactful for the reader; rather than understanding the role of student as *learner*, the teacher recognizes students as capable of their own liberation, whose agency supports them as “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 79).

In *Every Person is a Philosopher*, the small-group writing workshop thrusts the reader into a discussion of democratic pedagogy, humanization in education, community organization, and the empowerment of self-governance, all of which are relevant to those working in a myriad of educational disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, history, indigenous studies, and other contemporary subjects that explore the impacts of schooling. Although the majority of the essays describe and exemplify situations of adult education, the rationale and methodology being discussed carries over into any dialectical relationship because the essence of liberatory praxis is for anyone attempting to transform systems of oppression and is based on the belief that if “ordinary people develop confidence in their own ideas... they can challenge the control others hold over them” (Ayers et al., 2016, p. 10). The dominant educative paradigm, which effects most places we find teachers and students such as neighborhood preschools, mainstream elementary classrooms, college preparatory institutions, and even public playground politics, induces a reliance on power and a preoccupation with compliance while essentially undermining the belief in a person’s ability to be “fully human” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 88).

Unlike the many efforts to advise those in education on how to enact humanizing educative theory in various settings, the authors in this book avoid the stultifying impact of the explication and instead use a dialogical approach that reflects the message of their shared experience. Adams is described by many as “soft-spoken and attentive” (Ayers et al., 2016, p. 2) and his work is recounted as lived philosophy; his politics were in his practice as he approached teaching in a way that broke down didactic roles and embraced his place on the “side-lines”, which created space for students to “co-construct a school experience that lived up to their best sense of themselves, indeed, to their full humanity” (pp. 1-2). Each author tells their own story of “Hal,” some of them their moments of awakening to the power and process of humanizing pedagogy, and through their narrative the reader is invited to take a similar journey and to share in that experience.

If one is looking for a recipe for enacting liberatory pedagogy, or a play-by-play on how to teach in a problem-posing way, this book will not meet that requirement; that type of explicative approach is exactly what Adams was trying to circumvent, or rather subvert. It is anticipated that those who encounter the stories in this book are going to think, to be philosophical, to read deeply into the approachable narrative being presented, and to be open to the growth and empowerment that is being made available. The reader is a participant, and in this way the selected authors and their work reflect the praxis on which the book is centered.

The theme of the writing is consistent, yet the perspectives and experiences vary and offer something different within each chapter. The first piece, written by Adams (p. 9), is a concise introduction to his work and offers the reader, including one who has not previously encountered Freire, C.L.R. James, or Adams’ own approach, the rudiments of his influences as well as the design of his pedagogy of ordinary thought. Subsequent chapters, written by those who knew Adams and had witnessed his praxis in action, account for the emancipatory effects of this pedagogy on both sides of the dialectic while also addressing some of the potential problems that may arise when attempting to manifest such a subversive method. One contributor, Elsa Auerbach, discusses teacher identity, the importance of acknowledging positionality, and the ways in which Adams demonstrated checking his own social location and sought

to find a balance “between wanting writing workshops to contribute to social change and at the same time not wanting to impose a social change agenda” (Ayers et al., 2016, p. 22). In chapter four, Stephen Mogge and Kate Power write about the liberatory practice of “showing up”, or Adams’ way of philosophizing the educative approach of being present with the people, being available in a way that opened up space for writers but did not seek to control them or paternalistically “emancipate” them (p. 54). Other essays are accounts of the ways in which Adams’ workshop publication, the *Journal of Ordinary Thought*, had the effect of legitimating personal experience but did so not only for those people directly involved in the writing but also for those who would read their words and be engaged in the praxis of “[s]haring instead of being told” (p. 27). The excerpts from the publications produced by people from the margins, and the stories of their far-reaching impact and the ways in which self-perceptions can be altered, directly influencing social change, is only the beginning of the possible analyses that can be drawn from this book.

Hal is described by many of the authors as a flawed man, but one who was reflective and self-evaluative, a visionary, and a good listener. Of course these accounts of the radical teacher can have a transformative affect on educators interested in making changes to their own practice. Mostly each chapter relies heavily on the words of the students and this has potential to have more of an impact. It is as though the voices of those who experienced first-hand an emancipatory education are the true educators. From samples of student writing, to excerpts of dialogue surrounding writing critique and personal responses to what had been read, along with fragments of conversations that emerged from the topics that were encountered through the compositions shared, the words of the students say more than those of the teachers who author each chapter. In keeping with the thesis and scope of the book, the students’ experiences and words are valued and consistently written about and around in a way that honors them. It is their purpose, their goals in participating in a writing workshop, and what they understand to be important or necessary to share with others that offers some of the most insightful elements of the text. The students and their selected works and words exemplify the value of writing and storytelling along with its connection to change and agency. The pedagogy found in these pages reminds us of the words of Freire: “To speak a true word is to transform the world” (1970/2005, p. 87).

The value of this book is apparent for those involved in community social work, adult literacy, and educational projects in marginalized populations. What may not be entirely obvious is the importance of the work of Hal Adams to the more common educator: the mainstream, contemporary schoolteacher. The insightful discussion of radical practice, the experience of sharing, and the growth that transpired beyond the transformative meetings described in these chapters has a place in the K-12 classroom, the University seminar room, and between caregivers and children in the park. Is it a strength or weakness that the focus of this book is on adult education? As a reader outside of that particular field, one can still garner ideas for and elements of pedagogical rethinking and remaking. The process of transfiguring these works would require creativity and philosophical thinking exceeding the limits of what has been documented by these writers and the act of doing so could present an emancipatory experience in its inventive and experimental translation to one’s own frame of reference. The process of bringing a praxis influenced by Adams into different circumstances has potential to be transformative in and of itself; using the example of working with the politicized nature of education, which is more often than not viewed as a space to remain “neutral,” could be the sort of exercise that brings about the awakening of which many of the people in this book speak.

A potential drawback to the book’s message, which commences based on the belief that the need for liberation and therefore the existence of oppression is already established, may be

found among those readers who are grounded within the dominant paradigm and do not see the need to move beyond it. Those who have not yet questioned or problematized the status quo may find the book a somewhat sudden introduction. There is the possibility that, to the reader for whom oppression does not seem apparent, the book may be deemed inapplicable or irrelevant to one's own lived experience leading to a lack of recognition of a need for alternatives and therefore little desire to be open to them. This is the type of text that supports critical pedagogy that furthers its course, develops its message and methodology, and would be best accompanied by a companion text from the critical cannon, perhaps an introductory one that causes one to question the current paradigm. For those more experienced in the radical pedagogy, pairing this selection with Freire's (1970/2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* could enrich discussion and deepen an understanding of emancipatory practice in education. The effect of reading *Every Person is a Philosopher* is participatory; by this I mean that the reader has to remain active in the sharing process with the writers and their recounting of their experiences and the experiences of the workshop participants. The selected pieces, each in their own way, charge the reader who resides in the status quo to consider other possibilities while the effect on those who are already on their way toward a practice of radical teaching is one of encouragement and solidarity. The book is an invitation into a community and offers a first hand account of personal journeys in education, but it also asks the reader to partake by summoning the philosopher that is inside every person. Adams believed that the power of the story is in a sharing that legitimates all involved; the words found in this text certainly have their intended effect.

## References

- Ayers, W., Heller, C., & Hurtig, J. (2016). *Every person is a philosopher: Lessons in educational emancipation from the radical teaching life of Hal Adams*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York, NY: International Publishers.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (Myra Bergman Ramos, Trans). New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group. (Original work published 1970)