



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

Michelson, Elana
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015

Book Review

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Institutions of higher education can treat the life experiences of adult learners as raw student material – material that requires expert educators to transform it into knowledge. Elana Michelson questions hegemonic tendencies in higher education that often perpetuate dualism of mind versus body as well as dismissive attitudes about the value of embodied knowledge. Her argument that “professional discourse concerning experiential learning remains rooted in the disembodied Enlightenment knower” rings true in theological education as well as other areas of scholarship (38). When claims of knowledge need to be authorized in some way, the process of authorization is always embedded in power relationships. Michelson elucidates these relationships through her examination of institutional assessment of life experience for academic credit. Her book serves as a window for surveying epistemological issues of trends in higher education.

Academic scholars continue to question the legitimacy of learning from experience. Michelson traces the history of the program Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), as it originated from liberal educational ideals responding to needs of returning war veterans after World Wars I and II. College equivalency assessment and training programs met needs for “both relevance and access” (103). Similar programs were generated globally with changes in educational multiculturalism and class mobility. The need for systems that evaluate experiential learning in order to assign academic credit and professional credentials continues to be furthered by globalization. Michelson examines more recent developments in APEL as it responds to corporate and technical pressures on higher education.

Michelson enlists Alisoun, the wife of Bath from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, as a memorable symbol of the canny, shrewd, embodied insight that stands in contrast to the orthodox knowledge of formal scholars and clerics. The figure of Alisoun creatively questions gendered

polarities of body versus mind in the history of what counts as knowledge. Alisoun's critique of the church's leaders has a persuasive force while questioning textual authority, misogynistic attitudes of the priesthood, and orthodoxy's monopoly on interpretation. Michelson beautifully illustrates her argument connecting tales of old wives like Alisoun with M.M. Bakhtin's symbol of carnival as metaphor for the "transgressive possibilities of experiential learning" and "subversive knowledges" which may pose challenges to the economic and political structures of formal education (189).

Although Michelson does not address theological education directly, religious studies programs and theological schools with programs in field education and contextual learning will benefit from her study. Authorization for ministry is changing rapidly. Consider an applicant for a Doctor of Ministry program who does not have a Master of Divinity degree but has decades of pastoral experience. Experiential knowing may be valuable, but how can that value be assessed? Unfortunately, people seem capable of failing to learn from their experience, so explicating the processes that facilitate learning from experience requires more study. Institutions of higher education or authorizing bodies who oversee workplace competencies must assess knowledge in terms of preparedness to practice professional tasks. Michaelson's study would be stronger if she directly addressed specific examples of practical challenges of assessing the worth of experiential knowledge in consistent and fair ways. However, her book makes an important and timely contribution to the discourse on learning theory and will be valuable to those in religious studies and theological education, especially regarding intersections with critical-race theory, queer theory, and feminist theory.

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