Date: 11/1/93
Re: Paul Ilsley's Class
From: Bruce Woll

TOWARDS A THEORY OF COMMUNITY FOR ADULT EDUCATION: THE NEED FOR A CRITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF.

All of us would possible agree with Mechthild Hart when she argues that educational theory is in dire need of a theory of community and educating for community. Such a theory requires a critique of the concepts of self, person, individuality as these have been socially constructed, especially in U.S. society. For example, in some of our classes we are told to think for ourselves, to write in the first person, to recognize ourselves as knowledge producers, to listen to our own voice. At the same time we are told to be critical, to question assumptions we have taken for granted all our lives, to interrogate our experience critically. How can we do both of these things?

The question: What is the place of the individual in a critical, political-social pedagogy? Of the self, the person, subjectivity? How should we construct the meaning of individuality, self-knowledge, self-understanding, self, person within such a pedagogy? Do these words have a place?

According to a teacher of teachers at the University of Illinois, "one of the great deficiencies in teacher education today is the lack of an autobiographical sensibility and practice" (Ayers, p. 35). Paul has asked me to talk to you about myself, my reasons for resuming my studies. I will spend a few minutes telling you a story or two about myself, but I want to use this story to raise a question that I suggest is important for all of us; namely, the importance of autobiography for adult education and learning.

I propose to start by telling a story. After I tell my story I want to identify some of the questions raised for me by this story and have us break into small groups to discuss these questions and others you might raise, and to specifically identify how these questions have been raised in your own experience. Then let's regroup and report back to the larger group the results of your discussion.

I want to tell a story about computers and spirit. In 1989 I went to Nepal to train a group of Nepali accountants on a computer accounting program. Computers in Kathmandu! Over one thousand temples. The oldest standing Buddhist temple in the world. Asia! The mountains. Nestled in between China and India. And I am there to talk about computers. That trip symbolizes my life, which centered around religion for thirty years and then computers for the last ten years.

I have been trying to "find" myself, to get to the bottom of these experiences. Last summer (1992) I had an experience which I have had to "honor" as definitive for me in some fundamental sense, which I must not "betray," an experience which is partly

associated with words, but is also opaque, hidden, implicit, under the surface.

I am living "out of" that experience. I have been forced to confront my deep suspicions of spirit, interiority, subjectivity, my clinging to rationality, intellectualism, objectivism, as protection against the spirit, the messiness and "out-of-controlledness" of society. In Kathmandu I discovered how "western" I am.

I have been coming face to face with contradictions within that go deep, so deep they have been invisible to me; between my hunger for certainty and my hunger for mystery; my desire for security and my desire for excitement; contradictions that remain there as energies, forces, currents thtat demand my respect and attention.

This journey in has been at the same time a journey out. The journey in and the journey out have been driven by a horror of suffocation, nausea, claustrophobia, a journey away from death to life, a journey to reach out and join with others, to find a public space in which to breathe, with others who are feeling the same urgencies to push back the walls, expand the breathing room. I find myself just as threatened by those who absolutize the individual as by those who absolutize the collective, whether it is the state or the corporation, or class, just as threatened by liberalism in aboslute form as by aboslutist socialism.

I want to insist on interiority and the spirit. I want to insist just as hard on the webs.

I want to make two points. The first is the overwhelming importance of self-knowledge. I can make this point over against the claustrophobic reductionism of the AI understanding of intelligence and belief which eliminates the person, in the manner of objectivism. Over against the claustrophobic reductionism of fundamentalist objectivism. Over against the suffocating straitjacket of scientific objectivism or positivism.

I agree with those who are seeking to reconnect knowledge with the subjective, positioned knower and in this respect I am seeking to revalidate subjectivity and to support Hart, for example, in stressing "the overwhelming importance of self-knowledge" (Hart, p. 194). What is at stake here is interiority, subjectivity, the person, the self, positioned identity, internalized values, beliefs, attitudes, including values towards the self. The value of autobiography, of self-understanding, are at stake here.

The second point is that self and society are inseparable. The knowing, learning self is the subject positioned in specific historical, political, economic, cultural position, ground, context, identity. Autobiographically this insight emerged in the sixties, which pulled the rug out from under the form of Christian individualism I had grown up with.