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Editorial: Envisioning future research on the education and learning of adults

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Editorial: Envisioning future research on the education and learning of adults

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Establishing a new scholarly journal can be justified by the functional needs of a well-defined scientific discipline – or as opposition to its institutional and paradigmatic framework. This is, however, not the case with the European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA). It is, rather, so that the journal is part of the emergence of a scientific community, very deeply embedded in societal practices at the same time as it is reconstructing intellectually these practices and their context as scientific objects. In this case, the journal can attempt to provide an arena and some of the communicative resources for academic and broader social development of such a community. To fulfil this mission, its rationale and specific goals are equally related to a diagnosis of these societal practices and some visions for the role of scientific inquiry in these practices. As two of the six editors of RELA, and responsible for the editorial work of the first issue of the journal, we will discuss why this journal has been launched, and how the editors want to position it in the area of the education and learning of adults.

Some historical notes on the field of the education and learning of adults

Much of the recent discussion in adult education seems stuck in a contradiction between different educational cultures, which refer to particular historical experiences. On the one hand, there is a focus on personal and political self-articulation, which seems to be inherited from the traditional functions of community learning and liberal adult education. It comes in several radical versions – the traditions of national and local emancipation movements in the past and present, e.g. the tradition referring to Freire – but also in an individual humanistic version, especially in the USA and Europe. They are based on a multiplicity of historical and local institutions and organisations, which have an educational perspective. On the other hand, there is the instrumental perspective on lifelong learning for work, theoretically underpinned by human capital theory and similar frameworks of understanding, which articulates the growing political and societal attention on adult learning, but mostly separated from institutions and organisations for adult education.

This contradiction between different educational cultures must be seen as a temporary frontline in a much more comprehensive historical transformation of the role of the education and learning of adults. The conceptual shift from “education” to “(lifelong) learning” is the political synthesis of changes in the societal functions of the education and learning of adults but it has – for wider societal and political reasons – been “constrained” to a very narrow understanding of human learning needs.

Adult education has historically developed complementarily to the greater history of modernisation and (formal) education, enabling individuals to deal with new societal realities. The very notions of adulthood and individuality result from this history, as a gradual and complex process of *socially creating* the individual conscious agent in society has replaced the *assigning* of adulthood by ceremonial inauguration.

The notion of modernisation is one way of conceptualising the interrelation of multiple institutional realities, conceptual meanings and historical changes in the education and learning of adults, comprising the inclusion of feudal dynasties and independent city republics in the melting pot of European nation state building, as well as the imperial inclusion of cultures and countries in the third and fourth world that had been living separate from dynamic centres right up until the great discoveries or later (Salling Olesen, 2010). Capitalist economy has been the main motor in this process, where traditional, self-sustaining local communities were included in larger societies, affecting all aspects of political, social and cultural relations. The development of institutional (formal) education, replacing informal education and learning, is just one of these effects.

There is a built-in risk in using the notion of modernisation as theoretical backbone of understanding. Seen from the dominant centre of a global, modernised world, it may seem that the education and learning of adults is on hand to enable modernisation, harmonise the levels of learning between generations, and live up to the accelerating needs for individuals to change. This may be a local truth of occidental modernisation, where the efficiency and speed of knowledge transmission seems to be secured at least for some time by institutional education. This was the hope encapsulated in the humanistic and egalitarian ideas of “lifelong education” which were developed in the 1960s and 1970s. The conceptual development from here to a notion of “lifelong learning”, predominantly addressing work-related informal learning, seems to be an effect of the actual neo-liberal degeneration of the western modernisation process, in which obviously the rhetoric of lifelong learning, economic concerns and the focus on employment and work are determining factors (cf. Fejes, 2010). This can be seen as part of a very local vision of global development. The position the most developed economies can hope to maintain is their relative competitive advantage in a division of labour where they take care of knowledge-based, complex work and the service work for themselves, while developing countries deliver raw materials and build up low-tech industrial production.

However, the more universal or all-embracing nature of learning needs in all the advanced capitalist countries may also bring them to bear on wider issues of contemporary society. The new societal staging of lifelong learning, which leaves ideas of formal as well as non-formal education in a more marginal position, placing centre stage phenomena which were in more traditional educational discourses conceptualized as “informal learning”. Instead of being stuck in the dichotomy between “intentional education” and “coercive learning”, or between different areas of learning, future research on the education and learning of adults must deal critically with the definitions of learning needs and sensitize theory and methods in relation to the new learners and new subjectivities that emerge.

Learning needs related to work and working life seems to be the societal need driving the reconceptualisation of informal learning. As long as the development of work takes the form of a strong division of labour based on mass unskilled wage labour, societal needs remain limited to training and retraining specialists and highly skilled craftspeople. But with the development of post-industrial forms of work organization, a need for broader adult education is emerging. The societal demand on the knowledge economy has changed to include what was mostly called soft skills (e.g. communicative and collaborative skills, quality consciousness, professional attitudes, self confidence) but also traditional literacy as well as new literacies (e.g. numeracy and mathematic understanding, computer literacy). Work-related learning seems to become broader and deeper and increasingly interferes with personal needs and identity. The most visionary capitalists and managers see this development clearly, where as a lot of the contemporary policy in Europe is still trying to bring education back to conservative basics under the umbrella of lifelong learning.

The political consensus on lifelong learning and competence development may not be so easy to maintain in this narrow perspective. Rather, the focus on work and human resource development may raise issues of control and the quality of work. The ideas of a knowledge-based economy have been criticized from several perspectives. One line of critique applies a wider, ecological perspective on work and learning, questioning the inward colonialism of human life without boundaries (Hochschild, 1997) and its cultural consequences (Sennett, 1998; Negt, 1984). The demands on human flexibility and adaptation may erode the conditions of socialization and subjectivity, i.e. the human resources as a whole. Another perspective emphasises the direct political aspect of learning, the need to advance a politicisation of work, including environmental questions, ownership and utility value of production, drawing on vanguard experiences of cooperative enterprises (e.g. The Mondragon cooperative), projects for conversion of production (Lucas Aerospace and others), and a vision of self-regulated work. The dramatic emergence of the climate crisis and the fragility of the capitalist world economy underscore the need for more comprehensive perspectives on work and learning than the instrumental version of lifelong learning.

The neoliberal scenario of an individualised competence market, which will be subsumed into a global labour market, will most likely provide an unprecedented example of market failure – and it will definitely have extreme effects in terms of inequality and the colonization of human labour. The question is whether there is another scenario in which the significance of the labour force as a subjective factor in the economy can be turned into individual and collective self regulation of work and learning.

The resources for any alternative to neo-liberal global capitalism must to some extent be found in many contexts that do not necessarily even see themselves as education or learning. In Europe, we can look into experiences of the past cultural practices, in social organizations and in experiences of trade unions and other communities. They may be found in the forms, level of education, expectations and preferences of young people as well as adults, but they do not form a simple and coherent alternative. But even more, we may have to look for the local and regional experiences outside Europe, which are engaged with the transformations of societies under the influence of the European-North American-based capitalist globalisation process. While the new discourses of lifelong learning are international, Anglophone and relatively homogenous, adult education traditions are locally rooted and have many names: *popular education*, *community education*, *educacao popular*, *politische bildung*, *liberal education*, *folkeoplysning*, *folkbildning*, *formation des adultes*, *formazione*

popular, *volksbildung* and *citizenship education* to name a few. In adult education discussions, these many names give rise to translation problems - although the names in different languages overlap, they are not the same because their meanings and the practices they refer to are related to societal and cultural contexts.

The mission of RELA will be defined in the reflection of the “real historical” as well as the “conceptual” dynamic. In the background of these general ideas, the editors pointed out – among others - the following concrete areas of interest:

- the Copernican turn of theorising from “education” to “learning”
- a shift from a predominantly philosophical and normative theory of education to an empirical and critical investigation of learning processes and contexts
- the redefinition of the order of objectives (cultural technique/literacy – community education - skills/competence – political education and enlightenment – etc.)
- the contradiction between a diverse historical reality and a uniform (global) policy agenda
- a restructuring of cultural regimes as a result of which an Anglophone hegemony emerges

The new and diverse field of interest has announced itself in academia by the fact that studies of the education and learning of adults have been drawing inspiration for research from many disciplines and research domains. Traditionally, a philosophical discipline of education has been supplemented with psychology and traditional social science disciplines, but recently many other disciplines have contributed theoretical and especially methodological inspirations, for example, from cultural studies, gender studies, policy studies, and working life research. The first issue of RELA cannot cover this multiplicity but it should provide examples which show how and why this broad and disorderly flow of academic inspiration is productive.

For this first issue of RELA, we have invited contributions from academics from different part of Europe and beyond, articles that illustrate some of the above-mentioned multiplicity of perspectives. These articles will be introduced at the end of this editorial.

The path to launching a new journal

First of all, RELA is the output of many years of academic work and networking within the framework of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA). The organisation was founded in 1991, and has since expanded in size, both in number of members and in number of active research networks. Firstly, its function was to encourage research in the area of adult education and learning and to facilitate research oriented international communication through network conferences and seminars, and by inviting young researchers and PhD students to participate in such activities. Secondly, in order to establish a research community, one of the main aims of ESREA has been to encourage international publication of research in all the areas of education and learning of adults. This has mainly been conducted in two ways. Through the publication of conference proceedings and books based on conferences, published by university publishers or local publishers; and since 2005, the publication of a dedicated series with Peter Lang Publishers. Such publications have been important in the work on building a sense of connection and identity around certain research topics and around the ESREA research networks. It has also made research results available to

people outside the networks, through distribution to university libraries, and the possibility to buy the books through bookshops and publishers.

For several years there has also been an ongoing discussion about a more stable and continuous channel of publishing research results in this area, as edited collections have a limited distribution. The traditional way of publishing scholarly work is academic peer-reviewed journals, establishing the scope, the status and the quality criteria of a particular field. RELA is ESREA's bid to take up this academic tradition, interwoven with further work on developing ESREA as a research society.

However it was also felt necessary to reconsider the format and business model of journals. The traditional way of publishing journals has been through publishers who charge subscription fees. The subscription of libraries and institutions to online access to the journals make up an increasing and dominant part of the journals' income at the same time as subscription to hard copies has become rather expensive. This way of publishing makes the availability of research results limited to those who can afford paying for such subscriptions, or are affiliated with institutions who can. Open access publishing has emerged as an alternative business model. Open access means that publications are made available on the internet for free, whereas the costs of producing them are covered by public grants or by user fees paid by those who want to publish their research, or their institutions. Through open access, research is made available to a broader audience, not only those who can pay. There seems to be a recognition that new technologies and a new global scientific arena call for innovative business models in scholarly communication. Therefore, we believe that publishing a journal as open access will contribute to broadening the academic debate, making research more available, at the same time as it provides a space for enhancing the quality of the research we are engaged in. It should be emphasized that open access does not in itself change the editorial tasks, the quality assessment, or the need for technical presentation. Basically the establishment of an online open access journal is just a more contemporary way of meeting the requirements for scholarly publication, and can become an important point in the development of ESREA as a research society.

Why a new journal?

The need for a new journal in the area of the education and learning of adults somehow relates to those journals already available in the same area. They include the Adult education quarterly, the International journal of lifelong education, Studies in continuing education and Studies in the education of adults. What is RELA's contribution in relation to these journals and why launch a new European journal? There are three issues that we would like to raise in response to such questions. 1. The political landscape of the education and learning of adults has changed dramatically in Europe in the last decade. 2. So has the field of research in the education and learning of adults and 3. The available journals do not in a sufficient way address issues at stake in the education and learning of adults in Europe.

Major changes have taken place in the field of the education and learning of adults in Europe during recent decades, and have attracted much more public and political attention. Until the 1960s or 1970s, adult education was a relatively limited and marginal sector in most countries in Europe, and was provided by civil society organisations, in some countries with substantial legal and financial support by the state. Its main content was, beside basic literacy, liberal/popular cultural and political education. In the 1970s and 1980s, new trends emerged in parts of Europe. Substantial

growth in activity together with new priorities on creating second chance access to higher education, and on vocational training emerged (Salling Olesen, 1989). And since the 1990s this vocationalism has become a more universal trend (Field, 2006), united by the agenda of Lifelong Learning, although still very uneven across countries. In countries with a high level of state involvement in adult education, for example in Sweden, there has been a financial shift in government spending from money spent on non-vocational adult education to vocational adult education (Fejes, Larsson, Paldanius & Roselius, 2009), thus limiting the opportunities for adults to get a second chance to enter higher education. The political umbrella over national policies has been provided by initiatives within the European Union as expressed in the European memorandum on lifelong learning (EC, 2001) and elsewhere. Since the memorandum on lifelong learning was published, the European Commission (2007) and the council of the European Union (2008) have developed a greater interest in the education and learning of adults. For example, through developing a glossary on adult learning, by developing quality criteria for adult learning providers, by developing the competence profiles for adult educators and so forth.

The creation of ESREA was in a way triggered by the European policy initiatives since 1990, and the many major policy initiatives taking place in Europe makes the relevance of European research organisation even greater, both as a support and a questioning of such developments and trends. It is our ambition that RELA will be one forum where such debates will take place.

It is, however, paradoxical that at the same time as adult education is growing in volume and policy significance, a number of institutional shifts can be observed at academic departments in some European countries, which reduce rather than strengthen the field of research. In the UK, for example, adult education programs at several universities are being shut down, and even whole departments of adult and/or continuing education have been closed, for example at Leeds university. At other universities, staff in the field of adult education have been moved to other departments that focus on, for example, human resource management or general education/teacher training. Regardless of whether one would argue that these are good or bad changes, we believe that there is an even increasing need for critical academic forums that can gather researchers who are interested in research on the education and learning of adults in a broad sense, no matter which discipline or department they belong to.

The most important reason for launching RELA, however, and the reason why there is a need for this kind of journal, is related to the geographical and cultural bias of those international journals already available. They are all based in, mainly publish articles from and have their main readership in the Anglophone world. This is no surprise. English has become the lingua franca of academic discussions and debates today, and this means that the publishing industry in the UK, the Commonwealth and North America has expanded from local to global, or has taken the challenge to provide publishing channels for the emerging global community. Something reinforced by governments and university boards across many countries, where performance appraisals are based on the number of publications, and to some extent citations, in “international” academic peer-review journals. We can observe a situation where the Anglophone communities dominate while all the other local and national academic communities and the practical and cultural experience they refer to, are becoming more and more marginal. In the light of this, we felt there was a need for a truly international, European journal, which actively embraces non-Anglophone (as well as Anglophone) contributions, and thereby broadens the academic discussion in the field. Thus, RELA aims to be a forum that is linguistically “open access”, which is important at a time

when local and regional explorations of issues are often difficult to foreground across language barriers. As academic and policy debate is increasingly carried out in the English language, this masks the richness of research knowledge, responses and trends from diverse traditions and foci. Practically, we will do this by getting more submissions of papers from colleagues all over Europe who do not ordinarily appear in the “international” journals. Further, the journal encourages contributions from colleagues in other parts of the world who can contribute to the ongoing discussions in Europe. This is not an easy task, as there are different traditions of publishing in different countries, and as it is a challenge for many to write in a language other than their native tongue. Only time can tell if we will be successful in these quite high ambitions.

In spite of these reservations against the Anglophone dominance in research debates and publication, we have chosen to publish the journal in English. There are several reasons for this. First of all, we believe that the debate might be enhanced by making it possible for more people to take part in it. And as English is a dominant language of communication, this is the language that might do the work we want. This will have the effect, hopefully, of research results from other countries than those dominating the journals today being made available to a wider audience, and thus there might be a potential for new insights and research results to emerge. As we do acknowledge the challenge of writing in a language other than one’s native one, we have chosen to have a language policy that aims to be supportive. This is done in three ways. 1. Papers submitted that are not written in perfect English, (although we recommend that papers are proof-read before submission if possible) but that are good enough to review for academic quality and rigor, will be sent out for review if assessed as being within the scope of the journal, and have the basic academic quality as assessed by the editors. If the paper in the end is accepted for publication, the author will be asked to have the paper proof-read by a professional language editor, and then resubmit a version in high-quality English. 2. Papers can be submitted in a language other than English if there is competence within the editorial group for such language. Consequently, potential authors should contact the editorial group before submitting to check that the language fits the competences of the editorial group. If decided to be reviewed, the paper will be reviewed in the language submitted, and if accepted for publication, the author will be asked to submit a high-quality English version of the paper that is identical in terms of content with the accepted paper. 3. Papers previously published in another language elsewhere can be submitted to RELA for review if this is clearly noted by the author when submitting the paper. If accepted, the author will be asked to provide a high-quality translation of the paper. With these measures, we hope to be able to achieve a good geographical distribution of papers in RELA, and to create a real international, multicultural arena, instead of the invisibly biased structures that are operating today.

A multiplicity of directions

Our ambition with the first issue was to gather papers from researchers from different parts of Europe and beyond that represent different research traditions - papers that can provide illustrations of where research on the education and learning of adults is today, and where it might go from here. The editors set up a theme and wrote an invitation, which included some of the reflections in the previous text, and invited a number of researchers to contribute to the first issue. We left the choice of detailed topic to the

researcher, only that it should be based on the researcher's own research, but we encouraged the writers to include some reflections of their own position in the landscape we had drawn up, and their ideas about the future of research in the education and learning of adults. Fortunately, the response was positive, with a single exception. Although it is impossible to represent this field, which is not clearly or easily defined, and as it contains numerous theoretical and methodological approaches, we think we have gathered an exciting and stimulating sample of texts from different traditions. In the following we will give a brief introduction to the eight articles, although we think they must speak for themselves. These articles are in no way exhaustive, and the forthcoming issues of RELA will offer a greater range of papers from different theoretical and empirical traditions, and a broader geographical distribution of authors.

The first couple of articles deal with the important changes taking place on the political and institutional level of adult learning. They reflect the new political attention to adult education on the national as well as the international level, and they also illustrate how these developments are expressed in very different local dynamics.

Antonio Fragoso and Paula Guimarães from Portugal relate to the general shift in the adult education sector in their description and critique of the development of adult education in Portugal since the 1970s. They draw on, as they define it, two distinct political approaches in their discussion; the UNESCO policy approach to lifelong education as framed during the 1970s, and the EU policy approach to lifelong learning as framed during the 21st century. The authors illustrate how civil society organisations (CSO) have played a key role in the promotion of local bottom-up popular education processes that had the aim of social mobility and change during the 1980s. However, policy changes in the EU have been taken up and migrated to Portugal where competences, skills, economic growth and qualifications dominate the agenda for policymaking. Within such change, CSOs are co-opted by the government to carry out competence-based courses and assessments, with little or no room to define the goals, methods and processes, which, as the authors argue, “reverse the possibilities for re-contextualisation and re-interpretation of social emancipation of public policies” (p. 29).

Aiga von Hippel and Rudi Tippelt from Germany provide an analysis of issues pertaining to participation in adult education. They argue for a need to analyse the meso level (institutional level such as professional activity) and its connection with participation in adult education. By focusing on the competences of the staff in adult education, and especially on a target group and participant orientation as professional action, they want to understand how such orientation can contribute to an increase in participation in adult education. By analysing the attitudes of teachers towards a target group and participation orientation they argue that the teachers see such competencies as important, and these competencies include things such as delivering high quality courses, or providing individual guidance of potential participants.

Several articles directly address the status of the research field, the challenges of defining its object and epistemological basis, and theoretical and methodological implications.

The first article, written by Mieczysław Malewski from Poland, takes as its point of departure Polish adult education research which has been left in a paradigmatic crisis by the changes summarised in the shift from education to learning. Describing the established academic concern as a technical interest, attuning teaching of adults and the function of learning to a modern mass society, he regards the paradigmatic breakdown as a crisis and an opportunity. He emphasizes that it is not an open and free choice for the academic community, rather, it is a shift conditioned by the underlying societal development of a “learning society”. After discussing the different potential meanings

of a learning society, Malewski finally outlines the dimensions of an analysis of different paradigmatic lines of reaction to this challenge, which is open to further reflection.

Robin Usher from Australia introduces the work of Deleuze and Guattari, a post-structuralist theorization as a way of thinking about educational research. He draws on their concepts *rhizome* and *lines of flight*. The rhizome displaces meta-narratives, foundations, endings and beginnings with an ontology of becoming. The rhizome makes possible multiple conjoinings and connections where lines of flights are those which decentre, break down coherences and open up contexts to their outsides and the possibilities therein. He uses lifelong learning and electronic communication as contexts and catalysts of research and argues for research without hierarchy and authority. He recognizes lines of flight both in research, where research can be seen as a desiring production, and research as a line of flight in itself viewing the subject of research as a nomad, and the object of research being that of nomadism. Through this, he argues, methodology becomes more multiple and flexible, where scientific methods no longer are the guarantor of truth and certainty.

Tara Fenwick, at the University of Stirling in Scotland examines the very dynamic and multiple development of research into workplace learning, which connects different fields such as adult education, human resource development, organization and management studies, labour studies and professional and vocational education. In these fields, terms such as learning are used differently, with different meanings, ends and aims. Based on a literature review of journals in these areas, she focuses on different representations of learning and argues that instead of seeing these representations of learning as different names for “the same”, they represent an ontological multiplicity, they cover different objects. Learning is not a single object but is enacted as multiple objects as different things in different logics. Therefore, we should not treat other ways of speaking about learning as another worldview that we try to incorporate in our own ontology, but meet them on their own terms, as unique ontological positions.

Finally, Staffan Larsson from Sweden addresses the internationalisation of research and the centralized structures in the profession, which has very fundamental implications through the emergent economy of publications and citations where academics needs to publish if they do not want to perish. By looking at three adult education journals that claim to be “international” and how they manage to be “international” in the sense that they have a wider distribution of authors from different parts of the world, and by having articles that look at “foreign” study objects, he illustrates how the vast majority of articles published in these journals are written by authors who have English as their native tongue, and almost 90% of the articles referred to in one of these journals are to authors from the same regions, i.e. Anglophone authors. Thus, invisible colleges emerge that include certain groups of people who publish and refer to each other in the field of the education and learning of adults. And a vast majority of these invisible colleges are Anglophone.

The last two articles display concrete research in the field at the same time as they emphasize a perspective of theoretical and methodological innovation. They do this from very different positions –an empirical case in the new extended field of lifelong learning in Europe and from an African context respectively.

Kirsten Weber from Denmark, presents an empirical analysis of a group of adult learners, which focuses on the wider subjective and societal dimensions of learning. The research deals with adult learners who are qualifying for a professional competence in pedagogical and social work. The focus is on the fragile self understanding and strong emotional engagement of the group members, and it links this analysis of subjective

aspects within the education with the societal status of the occupational group. The article is also a methodological demonstration of a psycho-societal analysis of the emotional dimensions of adult learning in relation to professional work, and it elaborates the theoretical framework of a deep hermeneutic methodology that can be sensitive to subjective as well as societal dimensions of learners' lives and experiences.

Astrid Von Kotze from South Africa illuminates the narrowness of contemporary work-related education rationales in Europe by introducing a more holistic, material understanding of learners' motives, based on their concrete life experiences. She introduces a livelihood approach to technical and vocational education and training policies (TVET) in South Africa. This conceptual and methodological tool relates the learning needs and motives to a livelihood perspective, i.e. vocational education and training must relate not only to paid wage labour that is measurable; work also includes tasks related to sustaining life. She argues that TVET policies need to embrace such a view on work, and view those targeted by policies as subjects and agents who draw on local resources to make a living. Rather than policy that aims to train people for one job, policy should create the possibility to create a sustainable livelihood security for people by taking into account their local conditions for work and livelihood.

This first issue of the journal ends with a book review of a book on active democratic citizenship that fits in well with the discussion raised by Frago and Guimarães. The plan is to include book reviews in each issue of RELA that relate to the theme of that specific issue.

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