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Editorial: digital the new normal - multiple challenges for the education and learning of adults

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Introduction

Media is ever present, but at the same time also invisible. The only time we notice media is when it does not work (Rahm & Fejes, 2015, p. 137)

Digitalisation, understood as ‘the way in which many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructure’ (Brennan & Kreis, 2014), is unmistakably a global megatrend permeating all walks of life. The effects are manifest in our daily shopping activities, our banking transactions, our leisure time life, the way we communicate, listen to music, watch TV and play games. Particularly the influence of digitalisation on the world of work is considered to have drastic social and economic consequences. Scholars comment these changes in diverse ways. Otto Peters observes that, in a period of not even twenty years, a ‘digital’ or ‘virtual’ world has increasingly appeared alongside the ‘real’ world, due to the rapid spread of the Internet and new media such as computers, laptops, tablets and ‘the incredible triumph of the mobile phone’ (Peters, 2013, p. 7). Manuel Castells (2010), views digitalization as one of the – if not *the* – defining characteristics of contemporary society. Optimists, like Jeremy Rifkin (2011) euphorically welcome the digital revolution. Other observers are more sceptical and point to the double-edged nature of digitalisation. They raise serious questions about the nature of the transformations it will bring to individuals and to society. Recently in Germany, an important group of intellectuals active in universities, in the media, in literature, in the churches and in business, have expressed concerns about the unprecedented changes produced by digitalisation. The members of this group have therefore presented to the European Parliament a ‘Charter for the Digital Basic Rights in the European Union’ (Charta, 2016), inviting policy makers to seriously consider emerging issues related to equality, safety, the use of algorithms, free speech, artificial intelligence, robot technology, transparency, the protection of data, elections, education, work, etc.

Contradictory voices have been observed time and again throughout history, at the occasion of the emergence of new media. Their transformative potential was often welcomed enthusiastically. Yet, the promises also encountered profound scepticism. Plato criticized the transition from oral to written culture in Ancient Greece. He believed it would deteriorate the quality of the human memory. And, often the promises did not always bring the expected outcomes. ‘Historians of technology would hardly be surprised to find more failures than success stories in this field’ (Flichy, 1999, p. 33). So, a critical scrutiny of how the new media affects our society in general and (adult) education and learning in particular today is an important matter.

In any case, a wild, unfettering revolution takes place in the conditions of knowledge acquisition in the Internet. This revolution affects the economy, human relations and education itself. The development of the free acquisition of knowledges, of literature, of music, of the present-day possibility to freely distribute knowledge and art all over the planet, on the one hand opens a very broad opportunity of cultural democratisation, on the other hand, it forces us to rethink the entire educational system’ (Morin, 2014, p. 119, translation DW)

The ‘digital turn’ definitely affects various educational practices and policies. ‘The technologies that become prevalent at a certain moment and at a certain place decide to a great extent what education is all about’ (Vlieghe, 2016, p. 550). Written and printed media have been part of educational processes with divergent groups for a long time. The protestant revolt against the catholic church in the sixteenth century was enabled by the invention of the print media by Gutenberg and the subsequent popularizing of biblical texts. The French revolutionaries were inspired by the writings of the enlightened philosophers. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, citizens, workers and farmers achieved emancipation through participation in reading circles, through their membership in libraries, through exposure to radio and television programmes and through participation in distance learning institutions.

When we know that the early printing was equivalent to the reformation, religious wars, the nation state, the school system, general literacy, the enlightenment, hence, to an entire Pandora’s box of ambivalent achievements, we have good reason, in view of the immense events that happen today, to be just as expectant. The extent in which these expectations are articulated in the modus of fear or hope, is a matter of temperament’. (Peter Sloterdijk, in Eichert, 2010).

Today, the new, digital media are omnipresent. They have become ‘the new normal’ (Hinssen, 2011). They do new things. They create new types of public sphere (Celikates, 2015). Recently the use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook has strongly influenced dramatic political changes like Brexit and the election of President Trump. They have enabled the creation of a ‘post-truth’ culture (Peters, 2017). The new media ‘give us new powers. They create consequences for us as human beings. They bend minds. They transform institutions. They liberate. They oppress’ (Silverstone, 1999, p. 10). Or, in the prophetic words of Marshall McLuhan (1964), they are ‘the extensions of man’. Knowledge and information are accessible almost at any time and any place. They create opportunities but also risks for educational practices. Social media is now part of diverse educational activities. Massive open online courses (MOOCS) are welcomed as the new instrument to democratize higher education. Much has been written and discussed, about these developments in education in general (Brookfield, 1986; Wildemeersch, 1991; Losh, 2014; Peters, 2013; Walsh, 2014, Peters, 2017). The radical changes are commonly framed as challenges for education.

Prototypical in this respect is the manifesto of the the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) , to create a Learning Europe:

We are at the cusp of enormous changes – from e-governments to online shopping to automatism and all the changes that the internet will bring. This means that we need to close the digital gap and make sure that everyone is comfortable using computers, tablets or smartphones but also all other related tools. We can also assume that many jobs are and will be disappearing and new ones will be created. Europe will need knowledge workers that can adapt quickly to these changes, and learning is the key for this capacity. Many governmental services and tools for civic participation are now available online. Digital skills ensure digital inclusion and participation’ (EAEA, 2015, p. 10)

However, the critical reflection on the relevance and the effects of the ‘new’ media in practices and theories of adult education remains fairly underexposed. Therefore, it is highly relevant to explore the perspectives, approaches and methodologies regarding digitalisation that are currently practised in the field of research on the education and learning of adults, particularly in the European context. For the call for papers of this digitalisation issue, the editors departed from some key issues related to the major changes taking place since the introduction of the digital media. Meanwhile, they have explored these issues further.

Changing places and spaces of learning

Some decades ago, learning spaces were mainly concentrated in traditional educational institutions such as schools and adult education centres. Then came various initiatives of distance learning such as educational radio, television and open universities, creating new opportunities for adults to study at distance from these institutions and to acquire degrees at their own rhythm. Today, the digital transformation opens entire new spaces of education and learning. Smartphones (mobile learning) tablets and Apps are becoming central media for informal learning. Classical boundaries between formal, non-formal and informal education are getting blurred. Knowledge and information are now widely accessible through the Internet, with Wikipedia as the most prominent example of that development. Still, recent research in Germany shows that teachers in secondary and higher education are often afraid or reluctant to fully engage with the opportunities of digitalisation (Hartung, 2017).

Online learning platforms such as EPALe, the Electronic Platform for Adult Education and Learning in Europe (<https://ec.europa.eu/epale>), are being created. EPALe, funded by the European Commission, is aimed at creating a digital community : ‘Members of the adult education community can network on the features of the website (forums, blogs) throughout Europe.’ Also augmented and Virtual Reality is gaining pace. The immersive qualities are expected to enhance learning. Virtual museum tours and exhibitions are becoming mainstream practices. Even entirely virtual museums, such as the national Virtual Museum of Canada, (<http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/>) are being created.

However, these developments also give rise to diverse questions. To what extent does online education and learning provoke further isolation of individuals? What is the value of face-to-face education as compared to online studying? What are the consequences of the new forms of access to adult education provision and the possible redistribution of educational opportunities for varied groups of adults. Simultaneously – and this is definitely not a contradiction – we currently observe in the field of adult

education a renewed interest in questions related to learning spaces and new learning architectures.

All these new developments have also had profound impact on the policies and the organisation of curricula (e.g. modularisation), on the accreditation of prior learning and on the development of national and international qualification frameworks. The changes seem unavoidable. But are they also unmistakably advantageous?

Digital literacy

Digital literacy is currently a major matter of public concern for educationalists and for policy-makers, often in connection with the discourse on competences. Joris Vlieghe claims that ‘there is a fundamental difference between traditional and digital literacy, or more precisely between *what it means to be a literate person in digital and pre-digital times*’ (2016, p. 558). The digital times we live in create a new gap between the digital literates and the digital illiterates. Wikipedia informs us that ‘Digital literacy is the set of competencies required for full participation in a knowledge society. It includes knowledge, skills, and behaviors involving the effective use of digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktop PCs for purposes of communication, expression, collaboration and advocacy’ (Wikipedia, 2017). It further informs us about the ‘digital divide’, or the gap between the people familiar with the use of new information and communication technologies (ICT) and the ones who have been left out of the consecutive digital revolutions (Mok & Leung, 2012).

This may have important consequences on how to organise practices of adult (basic) education in the future. Learning to read and write will need to be complemented by learning to use the new media. However, as Freire has taught us, literacy is not simply about ‘reading the word’, it is also about ‘reading the world’ in a critical way. So, in this respect also new critical questions emerge. Are adult education practices mainly engaged in supporting individuals to accommodate to the new digital world? Or are they also prepared to take up the role of stimulating critical digital literacy? Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha and Claudia Strobel-Dümer (2013) suggest, within practices of adult education for the elderly, to look for balances between stimulating knowledge on how to handle the new media and to simultaneously raise awareness on the risks of the use of these technologies. ‘Not only is it necessary to offer adequate educational programs for older people but also informal learning processes within the social environment have to be initiated and supported. These self-controlled learning processes can, for instance, take place in self-organised computer groups or on Internet forums which, in turn, can be initiated and accompanied by educational institutions’ (Schmidt-Hertha & Strobel-Dümer, 2013, p. 39).

Also the self-perception of adult education institutions will probably undergo major changes. They may have to move towards a more open institutional structure, supporting self-directed learning processes and bringing learners together. However, the institutional framework is likely to remain meaningful for the individual learner. Hence, adult education institutions will also in future continue to be more than pure service or learning agencies. Future research on these institutional aspects would definitely be quite relevant.

Opportunities and limitations for adult education and learning

The digital transformation of society is definitely also affecting practices of adult education. Pierre Walter observes that there is ‘an unending creative stream of new courseware, learning platforms, web-based training modules, tailored search engines, web-based surveys, and reference and assessment software. Online, distance, and blended hybrid adult education programs are popping up everywhere, in part driven by new information and communications technology but also in response to the demands and learning styles of adult educators who prefer to learn within the digital world’ (Walter, 2013, p. 151-152). Optimists such as Lynda Ginsburg et al (2000) claim that there are extraordinary opportunities for ICT to bring about change for adult populations with low literacy. They argue that particularly adult education practice is well-suited for this task since it is less hampered by rigid education systems, required curricula and constraints on individual motivation (Ginsberg, et al, 2000, p. 79). They further observe that digitalisation also strongly influences classroom culture in adult education. ‘Some teachers and learners find the changes in the roles and the relative power dynamics of the teacher and learners exciting, while others see them to be disconcerting and confusing. Learners have access to a greater variety and depth of information independent of the teacher, who no longer has to specify all classroom activities, but may become a facilitator who questions, encourages, helps, and challenges. Learners take more control and responsibility for their own learning’ (ibid., p. 82).

In addition, the concept of ‘Personal Learning Environments’ is becoming increasingly significant in relation to ‘Connectivism’, a learning theory for the digital age (Siemens, 2005). Learners develop their personal knowledge and learning networks through selective connections with other actors – whom they not necessarily need to know. Closely related to this is the concept of, networked learning‘ defined as ‘learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources’ (Jones, 2015, p. 5). Also contiguous concepts such as co-operative and peer learning gain prominence in the discussions in the field of practice.

On the positive side there is, for example, the phenomenon digital story telling. Many researchers report about this renewed interest in a methodology that goes back on a long narrative tradition in adult education. in diverse contexts and for different groups of participants, particularly disempowered populations who, with such stories, can make their voices heard. According to Marsha Rossiter and Penny Garcia (2010, p. 37) ‘digital stories are short vignettes that combine the art of telling stories with multimedia objects including images, audio and video’. There is plenty of user-friendly software available on the Internet to engage with this methodology in adult education contexts. And they also claim that digital story telling contributes to the breaking-down of hierarchies in educational contexts and hence, to the increased self-direction and autonomy of the participants. Another positive aspect is gamification. Play is an element of culture as Huizinga (1949) pointed out in his book ‘Homo ludens’. Game principles are said to foster the flow of experiences and to make learning more enjoyable. In previous years game-design elements have been introduced to non-game contexts such as classes for literacy education, as well as training practices in the armed forces. In addition, some authors, like Gee and Hayes (2013) and Harding (2011) suggest that gaming brings individuals together in new ways, while creating

opportunities to experiment with new identities and fostering new forms of associational life.

However, in line with what we mentioned above about the risks of the use of new media in everyday life, various authors point to the possible negative effects of digital media use. Particularly Otto Peters is very sceptical about the effects it could have on our cognitive functioning: information overload causes anxiety and reduces performance; multitasking, promoted by social media negatively influences concentration. In response to such effects, adult education practice can develop alternative ways. Pierre Walter therefore suggests to engage in ‘digital outdoor learning’ initiatives. In his view, there is a growing interest in outdoor adult education programmes with positive effects on our emotional, physical and mental health. Such initiatives can easily integrate digital devices, yet they can function as ‘an antidote and a complement to the digital world, not only soothing tired computer eyes, aching backs and wrists, short attention spans and nervous bodies, but also offering holistic, mentally and physically challenging learning experiences’ (Walter, 2013, p. 156).

Knowledge production and knowledge diffusion

Access to the Internet currently makes knowledge ubiquitously available. The intensity with which digital media have become entangled with our everyday lives is astonishing, although we do not seem to realize it any more. Digital media have become the new normal for many citizens throughout the world. Many of us are almost permanently online, for reasons of work, of leisure, of community building, friendship and family formation. ‘Media is ever present, but at the same time also invisible. The only time we notice media is when it does not work’ (Rahm & Fejes, 2015, p. 137). The Web 2.0 is the generation of interactive media. It stands for the creation and exchange of user-generated content through Blogs, Wikis, Twitter and other social media. Virtual/networked learning communities may transform practices of adult education. Benkler (2006, in Brennan & Kreiss) argues that ‘peer’ or ‘social’ production can take shape for the first time on a global scale. Open source communities, making use of open source software, create new opportunities of free knowledge sharing and joint knowledge production. The rapidly falling costs of the production and distribution of digital information, enables peer production to compete with market mechanisms of producing knowledge and culture.

The rise of digital media also creates opportunities for development purposes that may help to reduce the North-South divide. Open Educational Resources (OER) are freely accessible documents and media that are used for educational and research goals. The development and promotion of open educational resources is often motivated by a desire to counter the commodification of knowledge and provide an alternate educational paradigm (OER, 2015). Stimulated by supranational organisations like UNESCO and the OECD, varied materials and resources are made available online. The ambition of these initiatives is to facilitate the access to knowledge, particularly for those individuals and communities and nations that before were deprived of advanced access to knowledge and information. However, in connection with this development, also new questions arise. Next to the interesting advantages of the OER initiatives, Knox (2013) raises five important questions/objections. (1) Central concepts of OER such as ‘freedom’ and ‘openness’ are undertheorised. (2) The relationship between educational institutions (such as universities) and OER-organisations is ambivalent, particularly regarding the accreditation of what is being learned through the media (3)

In the OER-discourse the teacher is absent and hence, there is no place for pedagogy. (4) The humanistic assumptions of OER about autonomy and self-direction should be dealt with critically. (5) The OER-discourse is strongly inspired by a human capital philosophy that aligns with present-day needs of capital accumulation. In line with these observations we wonder to what extent adult education practitioners and researchers deal with these issues related to new forms of knowledge production and diffusion. Are they mainly supporting the optimistic, humanistic discourse on that matter, or do they also enhance critical reflection on these new phenomena?

The rise of new learning industries

As mentioned before, new media affect the relationship between informal, non-formal and formal learning/education in many respects. There is an intensified policy to formally recognize self-directed learning experiences in the informal contexts of the Internet, but also an increased blurring of the borders between non-formal forms of adult and continuing education and formal educational systems. This is clearly the case for the proliferation of MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) provided by universities resulting into (chargeable) certificates. In spite of the fact that the initial enthusiasm for these MOOCS has decreased, the recent dynamics demonstrates an impressive transformation (Schulmeister, 2013). Three years ago, the initiative resulted from a reaction against expensive fees for university courses. Today 16 million students study at the online college Coursera, which delivers a provision across 130 institutes. Harvard University and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) have put online courses for free on the non-profit learning platform edX. They have reported that, in the four years of the existence of this initiative, 4,5 million individuals have participated and 245.000 certificates have been awarded (Chuang & Ho, 2016).

There is an increasing pressure in the field of Higher Education to introduce digital learning environments, which will surely require important investments. However, this development will not be limited to the level of higher education. This process shows, as well as the videos of the Khan Academy that have been downloaded half a billion times from youtube, that new free provisions presented on the Internet reach big numbers of target groups. The immense popularity of the TED-conferences on youtube demonstrates the power of digital provision that opens new opportunities for marketization, as the commercialization of the TED-books demonstrates. Increasingly new societal models are being experimented, which raises questions about the balance between private and public provision (Weiland, 2015). Simultaneously the digital users are becoming increasingly transparent. Their data and profiles resulting from 'data mining', generate automatic learning profiles that are valuable for big IT-companies/learning industries and publishers.

Inevitable political issues

The developments described above, and their related assumptions about how digital media affect society as a whole and (adult) educational practices in particular, give rise to important political issues. Policy-makers are becoming increasingly aware how digitalisation, the Fourth Industrial Revolution with the focus on cyber physical systems, transforms our culture, our economy, our individual and social behaviours. To consider digitalisation as an isolated process would be an a-political approach. The

former president of the European parliament observes that the totality of our society changes through digitalisation. ‘This can only be compared – if at all - with the industrial revolution of the 18th and the 19th century, that also produced social, economic, cultural, urban and climate changes. In its wake new political powers came forth, that put emerging social questions on the agenda’ (Schulz, 2015, p. 6, translation DW).

However, one could also argue that policy-makers increasingly describe digitalisation as ‘solutions’ to various social problems, whereby adult lifelong learning is described as a central instrument for enabling these solutions. They could be seen as drivers of the increasing digitalisation, while technology is provided by a keen industry. In line with this, digital skills are placed at the core of programmes and initiatives of the Lisbon Agenda, and they are described by the European Commission (2015) as necessary components for meeting the *Europe 2020* strategy for lifelong learning.

Challenges for adult education practice and research

Education has now undergone the digital turn and to a large extent been captured by big data systems in administration as well as teaching and research. Criticality has been avoided or limited within education and substituted by narrow conceptions of standards, and state-mandated instrumental and utilitarian pedagogies. There have been attacks on the professional autonomy of teachers as arbiters of truth. If education is equated almost solely with job training rather than a broader critical citizenship agenda for participatory democracy, we can expect the further decline of social democracy and the rise of populist demagogue politicians and alt-right racist parties’ (Peters, 2017, p. 3).

Today the rise of digital culture raises questions that inevitably also need to be addressed by adult educators, by adult education researchers and in adult education practices, if they want to remain relevant in present-day and future society. There are issues of democracy and participation taking new directions through the new media. Four companies, Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple ‘now dominate the Internet, penetrate our way of life, establish new values in place of traditional ones, and propagate the image of the new person in the fully digitalized world’ (Peters, 2013, p. 8). Social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, has recently been discovered by politicians as alternative news media, creating direct contact with the public, without the filtering by the ‘fact-checkers’ in traditional media such as the press, radio and television. All this clearly has important consequences for education in general and adult-education in particular.

There is the issue of digital literacy and the new divide related to it. There is the issue of a one-sided ICT skills orientation in policy-making on lifelong learning. There are the issues of privacy, of data protection, the freedom of expression, and the threat of a “digital dictatorship” (e.g. biometric identification, Vault 7 practices), which became very prominent with the rise of new forms of terrorism. There is the issue of the private and the public provision of knowledge. There is the issue of new opportunities for education and learning, but also of new dependencies and hierarchies. There is the issue, particularly for the low educated, of job-destruction and job-creation, and how to deal with it in a digitalized way. Many more issues related to the present digital transformations are waiting to be dealt with in societal debates, but also in places, spaces and courses of adult education.

Researchers have been invited to reflect on these issues and to present the results of their theoretical and empirical research and studies in this digitalisation issue of RELA. We invited them to consider following questions while preparing their submission:

- What new learning spaces and learning formats are being developed in times of digitalisation?
- How does digitalisation change practices of the education and learning of adults?
- How do the digital infrastructures influence the education and learning of adults?
- What are the consequences of the digital change for the institutions and for the adult education professions?
- How are discourses, publicity and responsibility transformed through the omnipresence of new media?
- What policy-making tendencies can be observed regarding the connection between digitalisation and adult education and learning?
- What are epistemological aspects of the digital transformation?

Diverse responses

In the responses to this invitation the editors, on the basis of the reports of the reviewers, have selected five papers for publication in this thematic issue on digitalisation.

In the first contribution, the two Swedish scholars, Lina Rahm and Andreas Fejes approach the recent discourse on digitalisation, digital competences and digital citizens in a Foucauldian way as ‘a history of the present’. A central argument in the paper is that popular education aiming for digital inclusion already commenced in the 1970s. At that time, computers and computerisation were described as disconcerting, which required popular education to counter the risk of the technology “running wild”. In current discourses, digitalization is constructed in a non-ideological and post-political way. Computers and the internet have become so ordinary, domesticized and ubiquitous in everyday life that they are now beyond criticism.

The second paper by the Portuguese researchers José António Moreira, Angélica Monteiro and Ana Machado focuses on social exclusion. They analyse the reality of Distance Learning and e-Learning in a prison context in Portugal. The starting point of the analysis is the assumption, that inmates without technology skills are professionally and socially disadvantaged once they are rehabilitated. The qualitative study reveals that, in spite of high motivation of the students/prisoners, there are numerous limitations due to the shortage of resources, the lack of guidance and the limited access to digital, audio-visual and multimedia contents. The research shows that the inmates are rather sceptical about their reintegration opportunities, even when they are highly motivated to improve their technological skills.

In a third paper, the Italian researcher Rita Bencivenga, presents the results of a grounded theory research, focusing on the attitudes vis-à-vis ICT of a particular group of older adults (a 1952-1961 cohort). The participants in the study are selected because they feel quite confident with ICT. On the basis of extensive interviews with these individuals, the author comes to the conclusion that the dominant negative perception vis-à-vis older people, engaging with ICT, is not adequate. The traditional distinction between non-digital (or analog) natives, digital immigrants and digital natives is not

differentiated enough to understand the IT-conduct of different subgroups. She defines the researched cohort as ‘digital curious’. Curiosity drives them to engage in online interactions. Bencivenga concludes that the digital curious can be important facilitators of intergenerational learning, particularly in support of elderly people who wish to improve their computer skills.

The fourth paper by Céline Cocquyt, Nguyet A. Diep, Chang Zhu, Maurice De Greef & Tom Vanwing, from the Free University of Brussels (Belgium), analyses the participation in online and blended learning courses, from a social inclusion perspective. They define social inclusion as the combination of social participation and social connectedness, which contributes to the strengthening of bonding and bridging social capital. The research design of the quantitative study – contrasting participation in online and blended adult education – leads to differentiated findings, e.g., that blended adult learning enhances the development of bridging social capital. Furthermore, the authors suggest, that non-native adult learners experience a higher increase in social inclusion and social capital as compared to native adult learners.

In the fifth paper, Paulo Moekotte, Saskia Brand-Gruwel and Henk Ritzen, from the Open University in the Netherlands, deal with the concept of media literacy especially for the low skilled and low educated. Their analysis, based on database research, reveals a lack of relevant findings regarding the search for ‘effective elements of media literacy’ in order to prepare low skilled youth for a profession. The article raises questions about the traditional understanding of the relationship between literacy practices and social-economic participation and present a heuristic framework for future research regarding media literacy for low skilled adolescents. According to this framework, skills of self-presentation, self-profiling, informational availability and networking play a central role in view of enhancing economic and social participation of the low-skilled and the low-educated.

We have added to this issue also two open papers that do not relate to the digitalization theme.

The first open paper of this issue is by Pierre Walter and Allison Earl. The title is ‘Public Pedagogies of Arts-based Environmental Learning and Education for Adults’. In this literature study, the authors develop a theoretical framework to interpret adult learning processes in different arts practices related to environmental issues. They investigate three types of these practices in environmental movements, in eco-art initiatives and in tactical urbanism actions. They look at these practices through three pedagogical lenses developed by Gert Biesta: pedagogy of the public, pedagogy for the public and pedagogy in the interest of publicness. In doing so, they show the practical relevance of Biesta’s theoretical approach and develop an outlook to interpret arts based citizens’ initiatives from an adult education/learning perspective.

The open paper of the Italian researchers Rosangela Lodigiani and Annavittoria Sarli, on migrants’ competence recognition systems in the Europe Union, has a few characteristics in common with some of the published papers on digitalization. They also consider the potentiality and the ambivalence of new educational measures, such as the recognition systems. The background of their research is a EU-funded project. A comparative analysis of ten EU countries was guided by the question how recognition systems potentially promote social equality and how a recognition system can be considered to be ‘migrant friendly’ or, in the framework of the capability approach of Amartya Sen, be ‘capacitating’. The authors discuss the ambivalence of the recognition systems as, ‘invisible instruments of discrimination’. Despite the controversial results of the study, recommendations for ‘migrant-friendly’ recognition systems, such as the need for flexibility within all the standardization efforts or the active participation by

the stakeholders, are given. This qualitative research highlights the need to respect the ‘voice‘ of all actors involved in this recognition process.

Looking backward and forward

In our introduction we have sketched digitalisation as an extremely dynamic societal development, producing diverse challenges and efforts. In view of this, the presentation of the contributions to this thematic issue of RELA, inspires us to formulate some observations, including some reflections on ‘failing discourses‘ in the present-day research and debates on digitalization in adult education.

Skepticism regarding the promises of educational technologies

There is a general skepticism in the field of adult education about the question whether we are now confronted with a digital educational revolution or not. At least since the 1970’s, and the hype of ‘programmed learning’, the history of new educational technologies remains a ‘Potentiality Debate’. New visions were being developed. However, the connection between information technologies and learning remains a prerequisite. After euphoria comes deception

The fact that only few papers concerning the theme media pedagogy, e-learning and digital technologies have eventually reached us definitely is also the consequence of the formulation in our Call for Papers. The current edition Nr. 30/2017 of the Austrian Journal for Adult Education ‘Magazin Erwachsenenbildung’ (www.erwachsenenbildung.at/magazin) presents some strong contributions on the media-pedagogical competences and the role of digital technologies for language teaching and learning.

Equal opportunities in a digitalized world

The field of adult education is often preoccupied with the question of participation. Related to this concern, the selected papers do not engage in an intensive discussion about the involvement and the learning habits of target groups. Apart from prisoners and illiterates also refugees could be considered. The questions concerning digital basic education will definitely gain importance in the future.

Digital competence, social media and political participation

The political events of the ‘Arab Spring‘ have shown, in an impressive way, the importance of social networks for democratic movements. A few years later, however, we have learned to see also the ambivalences and dialectics of the social networks. In spite of this, the social dimension of the new media and the networking and collaboration potentialities for learning processes, remains underexposed in the pedagogical discussion. Also the discussion about ‘common goods‘ or , the ‘Commons‘ are viewed in a rather defensive way in adult education.

Whilst in the previous decade the competence concept gained prominence in various policy documents and curricula, a substantial debate about the concept of ‘digital competence‘ is still more or less absent. The continued relevance of the question of media competence is shown in an impressive way, against the background of current

societal and political developments, in the ‘Whitepaper on Digital and Media Literacy’, published already in 2010 in the US (Hobbs, 2010, XI). ‘It is vital for citizens of a pluralistic democracy who are committed to freedom and diversity to develop these competencies concerning:

- Reading or watching the news
- Writing a letter to the editor
- Talking with family, co-workers and friends about current events
- Commenting on an online news story
- Contributing to an online community network
- Calling a local radio talk show host to express an opinion
- Taking an opinion poll
- Searching for information on topics and issues of special interest
- Evaluating the quality of information they find
- Sharing ideas and deliberating
- Taking action in the community

All these ideas could be considered interesting suggestions for the programming of a relevant adult education activities on how to engage actively with social media and ICT.

Institutions and professionalisation of adult education

When digitalization is a societal megatrend, it will have various consequences for the institutions of adult education. The reflection on this aspect is still missing, particularly regarding the development of new business models (commercialization) and new legitimacy claims, e.g. the development of new learning architectures in ‘educational landscapes’ that support self-directed learning processes.

Also the consequences for professionalization efforts in the field of adult education remains an important developmental undertaking. Nowadays we notice in many European countries the ambition to provide resources and community building support to adult educators with the help of ‘Web-Portals’. The question whether this evolution will enhance professionalisation or, on the contrary, de-professionalisation’ remains open so far.

Many challenges regarding diverse aspects of digitalization are still waiting to be dealt with by adult educators and adult education researchers. We hope that this issue will inspire them to engage with these challenges and to develop creative answers to the many questions that have been raised and that definitely will be raised in the future.

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