

Adult Education in Communities

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Adult Education in Communities

Approaches From A Participatory Perspective

Emilio Lucio-Villegas

University of Seville, Spain



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JIM CROWTHER

PREFACE

Radical adult education has always been involved in developing knowledge, understanding and action from the ‘ground up’ rather than from ‘the ‘top down’’. However it has also required the expectation of widespread social and political change to galvanise and catalyse the experiences of people in communities with the possibility of macro level social change. This book is a guide for thinking about and achieving this goal through a popular form of participatory adult education rooted in communities.

In Europe the economic crisis from 2008 has led to the proliferation of austerity policies for the poor and a redistribution of wealth to the richest in society. This incredulous situation has led to a range of social and political responses, giving rise to the re-emergence of political forces of the extreme right as well as progressive political forces and social movements which are breaking the mould of the atrophied political parties of the former left. Greece is probably the best known case, where austerity measures imposed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, led to the collapse of the government and the rise of the fascist party Golden Dawn. The same circumstances also led to progressive counter-movements, with *Syriza*, a grassroots political campaigning party forming a coalition government in 2015 with a mandate to oppose further austerity. The 2008 crisis also led to the bankruptcy of Iceland, but unlike other countries where economies collapsed, this experience resulted in the unusual response of throwing the worst culprits in jail. In Spain, the growth of *Podemos* as a major political force, amongst a population fed up with political corruption and mass unemployment, is rapidly overtaking in electoral popularity the right wing and mainstream political parties of austerity. In Scotland in 2014 the movement for self-determination, primarily driven by opposition to the neo-liberal forces of the UK government, led to almost half of the Scottish population wishing to secede from the fifth richest country in the world. Something is happening in Europe.

There is a kind of education, including adult education, which would simply ignore these wider social and political developments as if they did not exist. In fact the situation is worse than this because often educators simply add to the situation unwittingly. This happens through a focus on the micro level of experience as if ‘personal troubles’ was something to do with the character and failings of individuals rather than the macro, ‘public issues’, which shape the real circumstances of people and the choices they can make. This kind of aloofness and naivety, as Paulo Freire

pointed out, is simply a means of siding with the powerful against the powerless. Much of contemporary lifelong learning discourse across Europe simply reproduces the ideological dominance of a liberal, individualist, vision of education locked into the straightjacket of economic purpose. But of course there are alternatives to this scenario which is dominant in European policy and the focus of this publication is on developing a more genuine, socially and politically grounded form of lifelong education rooted in communities.

Lifelong learning, like education, is never neutral. It involves taking sides, which means knowing what you stand for as well as what and who you stand against. If we chose education for liberation it means, in Paulo Freire's terms, that educators need to love the people and trust them in equal measure. Deficit discourses of adults and communities of the poor often start from charity, condescension or ignorance, which can never succeed as starting points for educating people. Love and trust, however, are essential characteristics of the radical educator who has the capacity to communicate with the people. To communicate means to listen, hear and respect rather than simply to talk and issue communiqués.

What I like about this book is that the issue of communication and participation in the lives of ordinary people, who are living through extraordinary times, is central to the development of educational praxis committed to progressive social change. Since *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published in the early 1970s we know that the written word is an important means of acting politically. What this has tended to overshadow, however, is the significance of oral communication. In this book, Emilio Lucio-Villegas corrects the balance by drawing our attention to powerful forms of oral literacy that educators need to engage with rather than devalue in favour of text or digital media. One of the tasks he sets himself is to explore the transition between oral and written texts based on a participatory, dialogical and liberatory education.

Participation can be a double-edged sword in that it can be used to bind people into agendas and policies they have little control over or it can help enable them to give voice to real and significant issues. Drawing on the work of Raymond Williams, genuine participation has to be an open and democratic process which enables all to contribute to the creation of meanings. Adult education in communities can then be involved in the process of creating 'really useful knowledge', that is, knowledge which enables people – individuals and collectivities who experience systematic forms of oppression, domination and exploitation – to think about, analyse and act on their situation individually and severally. By drawing on contemporary accounts of emancipatory action and participatory research the author elaborates on the role of adult educators in this context.

Interestingly, the work of Stenhouse on the 'teacher as researcher', a movement for action research based on teachers developing their own expertise and agency, to provide insights and knowledge to make progressive change, is drawn on to argue and clarify the role of the adult educator in participatory action research. Stenhouse's

approach to teaching is one that has been overlooked by adult educators, but gains a rightful place in this account. Reading this book might encourage more analysis of how his work can be claimed by adult educators. The ‘adult educator as researcher’ can be an agent of social change and this, today, is an urgent task.

The fostering of social and political change in the direction of greater social justice, democracy and liberation requires the construction of people’s alternative to the morally base hegemony of neoliberalism, which is so pervasive and destructive of genuine community and co-operation. Drawing on the insights of a number of key authors – Hardt and Negri, Williams, Gramsci, Sennett amongst others – a strong and contemporary case is made for a pedagogy of respect, that should be integral to popular education which is *with* and *for* the people.

Adult education needs to make serious engagement with the lives of people in communities if it is going to be a resource for social change. It will need to demonstrate how it can be meaningful to people making history and to do that it will need to start where people are in terms of their aspirations, concerns, ideas and beliefs. *Adult education in communities: approaches from a participatory perspective* is therefore a very timely book and the author, Emilio Lucio-Villegas, is the ideal person to write it. He has been at the centre of developments in Freirean adult and community education in the region of Andalusia, Spain, for a number of years. He was also – in 2008 – one of the founder of the *Paulo Freire Chair* at the University of Seville.

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This book tries to reflect on adult education and its close relationships with communities. It is a modest attempt to maintain adult education in the scope of the community life against the growing schooling, and the focus on employability and on the labour market. In the last years it seems that adult education has become a kind of provider of diplomas, skills and competences and has forgotten its role to enlighten individuals and help them to share their community life with an abundance of richness, diversity, sadness and happiness.

My attempt is to recover an adult education that preserves and encourages the creativity of people, not only as individuals, but as members of a collective that is living together. If adult education was born from people's struggles for a better life, now it seems an urgent matter to rebuild these foundations.

For me, adult education is intrinsically connected to daily life, and the life that individuals constantly edify in their interactions. If adult education is connected to daily life, one of the major tasks is to recover this feeling and to link daily life and education. I think that at present time, in a moment of intense reductionism, reality is usually presented as very plain, losing its complexity and diversity that are related to the fact that life is being lived everyday by men and women as creators and relational beings.

The book is divided into six chapters. In chapter 1, I seek to define some alternatives to the dominants tendencies of Lifelong Learning. These alternatives are – in my opinion – in the concept of *Éducation Permanente* and in the rescue of an adult education focused on the life of people. This adult education derives from authors such as Freire, Gelpi and others.

Chapter 2 is devoted to literacy, but also to participation. The notion of literacy cannot be reduced to the domain of some skills and competences. Literacy is a tool for communicating, and in doing so people share experiences. Thanks to literacy individuals become people in relationships. For that, literacy can only be participatory.

In chapter 3, I want to define some ways to express the everyday knowledge that people hold inside. The prevailing tendencies talk about an only and true knowledge. This knowledge became hegemonic thanks to the supremacy of capitalism, and has expelled other different approaches of knowing such as traditional knowledge, indigenous knowledge, etc. But if adult education wants to recover its pathway to become a liberating education it seems, for me, obvious that it must return to people's everyday and the knowledge produced in their daily life.

Participatory Research seems to be a methodology in accordance with these goals. For that, chapter 4 is devoted to Participatory Research and tries to present it as more as a methodology. Participatory Research is a good example of how the

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true essence of an adult education committed to people and looking for a way of liberation, could be rescued. And this can only be done, as Freire said, starting from the context where people live.

Participatory Research is useful, among other things, for edifying citizenship. The struggle to become a citizen is closely related to the struggle for more and better education. In chapter 5, I return to the matter of adult education and citizenship, presenting, again, some experiences and some lessons that we can learn from these experiences.

Finally, chapter 6 is devoted to the role of the educator. I believe that people working in adult education are educators and I try to situate myself in a perspective that avoids other denominations, such as facilitators, practitioners, mediators, etc., even if I could share some points with authors that usually are using these terms.

For me, it is very difficult to have a list of acknowledgements. Some people have accompanied me in this long – sometimes winding, but always stimulating – trip. As it is impossible to type a list without forgetting anybody, I am going to personify a very small group of people. The women that undertook a process of Participatory Research in an Adult Education School in the city of Seville more than 20 years ago. Ana García Florindo, a committed educator that accompanied me in launching and developing a project that combines literacy, adult education and citizenship in the background of the Participatory Budget experiment in the city of Seville. Chapter 5 is in debt of this work. I have worked with my colleague António Frago – from the University of Algarve in Portugal – for more than 15 years and one of the outcomes of this work is in the chapter 6 which is impossible to understand without this fruitful collaboration.

On the other hand, I am personally indebted to a lot of people. This would also be another long list, but they know and I know who they are.

Finally, I am very grateful to Paula Guimarães, Isabel Gomes and Darlene Clover who read some drafts of the book and provided me with wise advice to reformulate and improve it. Thanks also to Jim Crowther and not only for writing the preface.

But at the end the only responsibility for the words contained in this book is my own.

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December, 2014