

## Book review: Researching and transforming adult learning and communities—the local/global context

By Rob Evans, Ewa Kurantowicz and Emilio Lucio-Villegas (Eds.). (Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2016). 197 pp., ISBN 978-946300-357-5.

At national and international educational policy levels the focus has been on the training and vocational education of adults. In contrast academics and practitioners in adult education have stressed, over the last decades, the importance of existential, substantial learning, based on the everyday life of adults and intertwined with the environment and social milieu they live in. The book 'Researching and Transforming Adult Learning and Communities' is one of the examples, in which authors (from structural as well as interpretative social theories positions) emphasize learning interrelated with the struggles of adults to deal with life's challenges, with endeavours to tackle social inequalities, injustices, efforts to enhance quality of life and well-being on individual and social level. They underscore relations between adult education and change, between learning and community. The idea of community is understood as crucial for the discussions concerning the possibilities for social changes rising from the power of people. Biesta and Cowell (2012) highlight, on the one hand, the need for social cohesion and integration (a cohesive society needs 'strong' communities), but on the other hand citizenship and democracy. In this sense the authors of the book emphasize the bottom-up approach in community changes, where activity and participation of all members of the community matter; what is left for adult educators is the rethinking on how to foster constructive community change. For this reason participatory action research is favoured; the question, should adult educators be mainly organic intellectuals (as defined by Gramsci), public pedagogues (as defined by Biesta) or maybe public sociologist (as defined by Burawoy) in this process, remains present and gives many possible variations to choose from. The message of this book is however optimistic: adult learning and education in the community has a potential for the future, when it is connected to social movements and struggles for human rights and equality.

Communities exist 'in and through a complex combination of subjective, intersubjective and objective elements, experiential, temporal and spatial dimensions, and the ways in which such elements and dimensions are experienced and enacted' (Biesta & Cowell, 2012, p. 48). In this situation, adult learning becomes very important, because it paves the way from consensus to plurality and difference, from individual to social strength; intersubjectivity is crucial. An individual is initially involved in interpersonal relations, forming an inner space where people follow their interests ('inter-est') (Arendt, 1996) and space 'where freedom can appear'; this provides learning experiences, forcing us to move beyond the self and consider the plight of the other. Learning in community can therefore provide mutual cooperation, exchange of ideas and knowledge and could be a forum for social and personal change, a 'transitional space' (Wildemersch, 2012). Learning is a weapon against manipulation, lying and abuse. Adult learning in communities allow people to fight for recognition, social justice, solidarity, individual and collective well-being; it defends the principle of citizenship education and learning instead of the principle of consumerism, as ascertained by Torres (2013).

The book is a work of 20 authors from 11 countries, which offers a variety of insights to community learning practices and examples. It is divided into three sections. The first one is devoted to general and more theoretical discussions on the importance of learning activities at local level, the second stresses the examples of adult learning in communities and the third section emphasises learning through and within social movements. Rob Evans, Ewa Kurantowicz and Emilio Lucio-Villegas have written the introduction to the book. As editors, they point to the importance of social change at the level of community as an intersection of global and local, where learning is the result of people's daily life. Learning is central to different processes of change, whether being individual, social, cultural, political or interpersonal, and whether being connected to training, community projects or social movements. As for the importance of adult education in this process, they emphasise participation, dialogue and collectiveness as an opposition to growing individualism and competitiveness.

The first section, offers 'the bigger picture' of the topic, and is formed by four chapters. The authors are dealing with possibilities to face social reality and diminish inequalities by empowerment through learning and (popular) education. They stress the role of communities (NGO, services and institutions within) in relation to the role of the state and the performance of educators as mediators of social change. Rethinking in this section is based on heterogeneous cultural, social and historical contexts of authors, which open diverse questions and perspectives on challenges with similar roots—how to understand and foster community/local development and create new learning spaces.

The second section has six chapters, offering challenging and informative examples of adult learning in communities. Community literacy practices from Switzerland, Belgium and Turkey are accentuated as examples with various dimensions and perspectives; they are gender, age and ethnically marked, but throughout they deal with power and inequalities and stress learning for freedom, resistance and escape from deprivation and educational disadvantages. In this section, neoliberal understanding of citizenship is confronted with the concept of citizenship, based on collective needs and interests. Research shows that despite the fact, that the demands of young people are more instrumental and 'oriented towards struggles in the labour market rather than towards struggles in community and society' (p. 64), learning citizenship through activism remains of interest for young people. In one of the chapters the transformative power of education is outplayed through words that 'learning is both at the heart of social conformity and also at the heart of social change' (p. 103); through research it becomes clear that without critical standpoint in analysing structures of power and governance, evaluation of learning outcomes can be misunderstood and misleading. Analyses of adult educators' perceptions of dichotomies between different lifelong education practices (for example pragmatic and functional education on one side and critical, radical approaches on another) show that ambiguity may be inherent to the activities of adult educators. The question remains whether there is an awareness of consequences of certain choices among practitioners, but it is suggested that a more critical position of adult educators would be desirable.

In the third section learning is positioned in different social movements and social endeavours, which is presented through learning practices in five chapters. Learning practices are by no means ambiguous—in one of the chapters it is stated that 'no forms of education are cushioned from social and economic struggles for power' (p. 155). The author warns that discriminatory practices may also be reinforced through participatory practices, which means that we have to be aware of exercising 'power-over', 'power-with' and 'power-within' when being in the adult educator's role. Two chapters deal with the situation in the Algarve region, Portugal. The first presents the project

RADIAL and the involvement of women in training, local community development and entrepreneurship, which calls for collective spirit among women and confrontation with community reactions. Learning involves dealing with re-organisation of life and community, networking and finding a new position in community and society. The other chapter deals with literacy course, which have initiated wider cultural and social revival of discriminated areas—initiated through social tourism, festivals, social-education courses, social learning. The last two chapters analyse learning through and within two different social movements—Zapatistas movement in Mexico and Kaz Mountains Environmental Social Movement in Turkey. In both cases learning processes are the result of interconnectedness of individual and collective social movement processes and are defined: by social involvement; by a strong process of change (personal and interpersonal; social, cultural and political change); by individual development processes, which provoked changes in surroundings; by development of social and organizing skills; by high level of transformation and mobilisation, etcetera. Both texts show that social movements are learning sites, where learning processes are becoming stronger with the increase of active participation in the movement.

Throughout the book it is confirmed that the idea of community is crucial in contemporary discussions about the fabric of society, where civic activity and participation matter. Social movements have prospects to become the future arena for ‘civic battles’, based on learning and transformation (Klein, 2015). Learning processes at the community level have for decades been argued to be important, but have acquired new power in the time of crises due to alienation and feelings of hopelessness. Arguments stand for bottom-up strategies, for the power of social involvement of all those living in the communities, regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, level of education, etcetera.

The book offers a very informative and stimulating reading on importance of further critical work of practitioners and theoreticians in the adult education field and their common struggle to connect rethinking with action.

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