

Editorial: Citizenship and the crisis of democracy: What role can adult education play in matters of public concern?

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Introduction

Democracy is said to be in a bad shape. The causes of the crisis seem obvious. There is a growing distrust in our societies vis-à-vis the elites. Donald Trump triumphed in the US-elections on an anti-establishment discourse. Many common people supported a candidate for the presidency who attacked the institutions of the state with ‘alternative facts’. His supporters didn’t mind his aggressive speeches against women and ethnic minorities. The European project is under threat. The British will leave the European Union. Many Brexit-voters want to keep their borders closed for foreigners. Eastern European countries, mainly Poland and Hungary, have installed autocratic regimes. In Germany the phantoms of the Nazi period again manifest themselves. Southern European countries feel overpowered by the austerity claims of the Northern-European countries. Countries such as Austria, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, known as traditional democratic states, are haunted by xenophobia. The Union threatens to fall apart. Turkey, at the border of Europe, is moving towards dictatorship. Vast majorities of the population support their autocratic leader. The US and Europe have moved into troubled waters and democratic institutions, political parties, movements and citizens are close to despair. Comparisons with the interbellum are in the air.

Various, often contradictory, reasons are given to explain the belief of many citizens that democracy is in crisis: the fear for newcomers, the threat of terrorism and the discourse on safety, the instability of the economy, neoliberal globalization, the failure of traditional political institutions, the incredibility of political personnel, the hollowing-out of social democracy, the misinformation of citizens, the failing of educational institutions to enlighten participants with democratic competencies. Many of these reasons are probably partially true. They interact and often reinforce each other. However, of all these reasons, mainly the latter one raises our interest.



Do educational institutions, particularly the adult education providers, fail to arouse democratic competencies among their participants? Have adult education institutions evolved too much in utilitarian directions, operating in the quasi-markets of educational goods and services? Have adult education institutions lost their critical voice, while trying to adapt to the continuously changing demands of their funding authorities? Or have they developed new answers to the changing social, political and economic climate of recent times? Are they supporting new forms of citizenship in a world in transformation? Or, are old values and practices of critical adult education still resistant?

Many authors find it hard to present a precise definition of citizenship and citizenship education (Fejes, Dahlstedt, Olson & Sandberg, 2018; Nicoll, Fejes, Olson, Dahlstedt & Biesta, 2013; Peterson, Hattam, Zembylas & Arthur, 2016; Tarozzi, Rapana & Ghirrotto, 2013; Vandenabeele, Reyskens & Wildemeersch, 2011). They all observe that various definitions circulate in political science and educational literature. An important distinction regarding citizenship is made between 'citizenship as status' and 'citizenship as practice'. The first concept refers to the question who belongs to a particular nation state community (Yuval-Davis, 2011) and hence, is entitled to particular rights and duties of that state, whilst the latter concept refers to different kinds of civic participation in democratic practices (Biesta¹, 2011; Johnston, 2005). Other authors, with a political science background, often make a distinction between the liberal, the republican and the communitarian tradition of citizenship (Pierik, 2012), or between the liberal model, the republican model and the moral model (Tarozzi et al., 2013). All these distinctions sometimes (slightly) differ from each other and sometimes overlap. Since this is quite confusing, some authors suggest to be pragmatic and accept this diversity of definitions, since they are all located in 'particular conceptual frameworks and contextual factors' (Peterson et al., 2016, p. XI).

Also, regarding citizenship education different definitions circulate in academic literature. However, as Peterson et al., (2016) observe, they all refer to practices of formal, non-formal and informal learning in connection with issues of (in)justice and (in)equality. In line with this, they present in their 'Handbook of Citizenship Education', a broad range of educational practices focusing on a variety of themes such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, intersectionality, disability, refugees and asylum seekers, and issues such as globalization and global justice, peace, intercultural and interreligious dialogue. They furthermore distinguish between citizenship practices that are either socializing or transformative. The socializing practices concern the learning of people to take up roles in different communities, whilst the transformative practices refer to the ways people actively and democratically respond to matters of injustice. We tend to follow this broad approach to citizenship education, linked with various themes and issues, that is either socializing (citizenship-as-status) or transformative (citizenship-as-practice).

Adult education practices have traditionally enabled citizenship participation in direct and indirect ways. The direct ways are related to the connections between adult education organizations and different types of social movements, such as the workers movement, the feminist movement, the ecological movement and even some nationalist movements. These practices have a direct political or public connotation. They are places where the ideologies and strategies of these movements are studied and discussed, where militants get their schooling and where structural changes are strived for. They mainly connect to macro democratic issues. The indirect ways have to do with creating opportunities for participants to meet other people, while engaging with private worries such as the education of their children, questions of religion, culture and economics, or more practical matters of how to get daily life organized, how to acquire particular skills, etc. These indirect ways not only try to meet individual needs. They may also have social

impact in the sense that participants learn to communicate and engage with other people, other habits and other ideas, and hence, learn to reflect critically about their own self-evident assumptions. These indirect ways could be considered ‘micro democratic practices’ where people improve their capabilities as democratic citizens, but simultaneously ‘turn their private worries into matters of public concern’ (Mills, 1959).

Since democracy seems to be in crisis in our present-day societies, we think it is an important challenge to reflect on the role and responsibilities of adult education and learning vis-à-vis that crisis. But also to think about the role of research. Policy makers struggle with issues of individualization and disintegration dynamics in society. They also experience a loss of legitimacy of traditional political structures. In response to this, adult education is often invited to enhance social cohesion and engage in participatory practices, thereby stimulating more ‘active citizenship’. Adult education practices often align with these normative discourses developed in policy circles, thereby adopting a deficit perspective in which ‘[p]olicy language of citizenship education positions people quite “naturally” as needing the knowledge, values and competencies for citizenship and further development of these’ (Nicoll, et al., 2013, p. 840). Or, in Biesta’s words ‘It places (..) people in the position of not yet being a citizen’ (2001, p. 13). Such deficit-perspective raises questions to be addressed with regard to policies, practices and research of citizenship education with and for adults.

Is it relevant for adult education organizations to align with that political agenda? Or should they try to develop their own perspective in a more autonomous way? What could, in that case, be their contribution to more ‘democratic citizenship’? Is it their responsibility to transform private troubles into matters of public concern? And, if so, to what extent are they able to do so? Do they have to redirect their perspectives, practices and attitudes vis-à-vis ‘big’ and ‘small’ democratic issues? Does this also imply a different view on ‘learning’? And what about the researchers? To what extent have they reinforced dominant interpretations of the ‘democratic deficit’? Should they try to develop alternative interpretations? These were the questions we posed when inviting submission for this thematic issue.

The papers

We received positive responses to the call for papers, and at the end four papers came to be accepted and included in the issue. Three of the four papers are written by German researchers about German cases. This could reflect the fact that the public debate about migration issues is currently very lively in Germany. However, the four papers do, in different ways, respond to questions posed above. In her article, Tetyana Kloubert from Germany focuses on a timely issue in times of increased political polarization and “fake news”: the tension between propaganda and civic education. By rooting civic education in the German tradition of *Bildung* and *Mündigkeit* she argues that civic education can be an enabler of, as well as a counter force to, propaganda. In order to shape citizens who can withstand propaganda, the focus needs to be directed towards their autonomy and capacities to question what is. By providing civic education, the focus should thus not be on reproducing a pre-determined knowledge content but rather encourage participants to critically assess and question knowledge in a process of self-realisation and in a state of ‘Mündigkeit’ (free-spoken).

Bernd Käßlinger from Germany addresses another key issue in relation to the theme, namely how adult education in Germany deals with the so-called refugee crisis. The research he presents focuses on the way folk high schools have engaged with refugees

since the end of the second world war till today. The nature of people seeking refuge in Germany has dramatically changed over the years, from refugees from Eastern Europe in the forties and fifties, to refugees from places of war violence in the Balkan countries, in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. K apflinger has investigated citizenship education programmes in 47 German folk high schools over the period under study with the methodology of programme analysis. He has found that the majority of the provision over time is a kind of ‘education for the public’, meaning that the participants are considered in need of knowledge and skills in order to adapt to the changing circumstances. A minority of the programmes could be interpreted as ‘education of the public’, whereby the participants are actively collaborating in the construction of knowledge related to the issues of migration and refugees.

In the third paper Silke Schreiber-Barsch, also from Germany, reflects on the question ‘who counts’ in adult education practice, meaning in what ways are particular target groups being taken seriously as emancipated participants by the providers. The ‘target groups’ she focuses on are groups of ‘sans-papiers’ (undocumented migrants) in Paris (France) and people with disabilities in Germany. Building on the theoretical notions of ‘socialisation’, ‘subjectification’ and ‘dissensus’ as developed by the French philosopher Jacques Ranc ere, the author finds out that the subjectification (emancipation) of these groups of people often results from acts of dissensus, whereby they resist against practices of segregation in contexts of adult education. It is mainly by claiming that they are not voiceless, but basically unheard, ignored or de-legitimised, literally incapacitated, as they are spoken for or acted on behalf of. In response to this, the responsibility for adult education practice and research is in the first place to listen to those people who in many cases are considered voiceless in our societies.

In the fourth thematic paper Danny Wildemeersch from Belgium and Joana Pestana Lages from Portugal present the case of Cova da Moura in the Lisbon area. The area serves as an example of the collaboration of community workers and academics in the struggle for the survival of a neighbourhood that is considered illegal by the local authorities. The paper is a theoretical reflection on an intervention by a group of architects and an anthropologist, attempting to develop a plan for an alternative space in the neighbourhood. In this paper, the question, whether the intervention was a failure or not, takes a central place. While looking for an answer, different theories are used as lenses for interpretation: the ‘right to the city’ discourse, the understanding of dissent and the framing of policy initiatives as learning processes

Open papers

Beside the four thematic papers, the issue also includes two open papers. In the first of these Marcella Milana from Italy and Palle Rasmussen from Denmark focus on how task forces and commissions are assembled and used in policy making on adult education in Denmark and Italy respectively. They argue that research on these kinds of task forces and their influence is sparse, not the least in relation to adult education. Based on policy texts of different sorts from the period 2000-2016 they illustrate, amongst other things, how the use of commissions was more common in Italy than Denmark. This might have to do with Italy being a federal state, and thus they need include officials from central, regional and local governments in order to coordinate and come to decisions. Denmark, on the other hand, is a small country where decisions are faster implemented due to a developed welfare public sector. Thus, policy making and process is slower in Italy as compared to Denmark.

In the second open paper Tiina Tambaum and Peeter Normak from Estonia focus on how teenage tutors teach older people digital skills. Their aim is to identify which techniques the tutors use in their teaching as well as how the tutors' previous experience of the content of what they teach (the web page), influences their interaction with students. Drawing on video recordings of 14 teaching sessions, they illustrate that the most common teaching techniques were those when tutors were commanding and explaining, rather than being interactive. Further, students who had less knowledge about the content were more interactive than tutors with more content knowledge. The authors thus suggest that teenage tutors should be introduced to interactive tutoring techniques in order to become more interactive with their older students.

Notes

¹ Biesta speaks of 'citizenship as outcome', rather than of 'citizenship as status', whereby outcome refers to the result of an educational trajectory.

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