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CONCERN FOR THE QUALITY OF THE WORLD THE RELATIONS PREVAILING IN IT. AN INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION ON THE BOOK *REMAKING COMMUNITIES AND ADULT LEARNING*[1]

ABSTRACT: The direct inspiration for writing the text is the monograph *Remaking Communities and Adult Learning, Social and Community-based Learning, New Forms of Knowledge and Action for Change*, prepared under the scientific editorship of Rob Evans, Ewa Kurantowicz & Emilio Lucio--Villegas and published in 2022. The author, however, does not prepare a typical review of this book, but on its basis builds her own utterance on – in her opinion – issues currently important in the discussion on adult education and learning, such as: a return to the idea of learning community, democratic education, critical competences, socially engaged researcher. All these matters are connected by the fundamental concern for the world and the relations prevailing in it and according to the author they constitute the conceptual meaning of this very important monograph.

KEYWORDS: community, engagement, reflection on adult learning and education of adults.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to attempt to engage in a conversation about the meaningful themes present in contemporary humanistic reflection on adult learning and the ways of presenting them. The predicament is the recently published monograph *Remaking Communities and Adult Learning* in the Research on the Education and Learning of Adults publishing series. Its authors continue the theme of the construction of the quality of social life and the way relationships are built in it, which has been present in academic publications for at least thirty years. However, nowadays they try to highlight the contemporary problems we face as humanity. These problems are the life in the shadow of a pandemic, the environmental catastrophe with its consequences experienced in many regions of the world, the social erosion of trust, the huge economic divisions resulting in the rise of right-wing and populist movements, or the war in Ukraine. As I understand the authors of the monograph, all this prompts us-researchers and educators involved in solving social problems-not only not to be unconcerned about the fate of those who have an underprivileged status and are mistreated, but we must recognize that the quality of the world we live in depends on ourselves, and it's high time to take

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[1] Evans, R., Kurantowicz, E. & Lucio-Villegas, E. (eds.) (2022) *Remaking Communities and Adult Learning. Social and Community-based Learning, New Forms of Knowledge and Action for Change.* Leiden-Boston: Brill.

responsibility for it. And the key to make this concern real is, as I read the authors' intention in the book, to build a sense of community in the way we think about learning and its practices, in educational activities and the creation of their strategies, in the research design of learning and education and the procedures for their implementation. And this is how I would like to search for the meaning of this monograph for myself.

Learning community yet again

In the contemporary discussion, the concept of learning community is fairly well described. The meaning of this phenomenon, to put it very simply, is generally associated with the formation of intrinsic motivation for taking various actions to improve the quality of life and build relationships with and for others. A bond here is the matter that unites the subjects and the willingness to take it in their own hands, the effect of the activities carried out is not only the social capital that is created during these activities, but the change that happens in the subject itself. Thus, by helping others I change myself, in the process of working with others I learn myself and try to understand others as others try to understand me. Without engaging in a discussion of the meaning of community itself, the value of which can be problematic because, as John Field (2001) has warned, we have known from history examples of the formation of high-involvement communities that resulted in dramas including genocide, learning community in adult learning research has positive connotations. It means the practice of community based on helpful, altruistic goals, neighbourhood help, support groups, striving to build equal, fair relationships based on an understanding of a person's potential rather than his or her qualifications and hierarchical embeddedness in a social structure based on power and access to goods. This seemingly utopian way of thinking about adult learning has proved to be a salvation today in the context of pandemics, disasters, the economic crisis of 2008, which showed not only economic diversification, but that economic security and global forms of securing the status quo only include the wealthy. In the monograph presented here, the authors describe a number of projects for the practice of community and learning. Among other things, they describe how the organisation of neighbourhood groups and communities of support has taken off in many communities in Europe and more widely around the world during the pandemic. They give examples of neighbourhood libraries and volunteers who read books to the stranded, thus not only fulfilling the needs of the latter, but developing mutual relationships based on reciprocity and a sense of cooperation, in a way *saving* their own daily lives. They reported on the drama of one of the communities in Mexico, which, after the earthquake, has to take things into its own hands since it cannot rely on the government. Without giving up in this struggle to rebuild their lives, literally in

the ruins, they reach out to their ethnic roots, language, customs. All these examples seem to be saying that learning community is a form of human presence in the world and, at the same time, a commitment of an ethical type, because it expresses a person's commitment to others, makes us think of the "I" always in the perspective of "we", that is, mutual commitments.

Democratic education

As we think about the origins of adult education and its social significance, we generally refer to the social educational movement, the struggle for decent work and salaries, literacy efforts as a form of fulfilment of human rights and a world based on fair, equal relations. However, this construct from a hundred years ago does not become irrelevant. It should be mentioned that in adult education theory, the references to practices in Paulo Freire's terms aimed at constructing "truly useful knowledge" as the essence of the activities undertaken, and their embeddedness in the adult learners' own culture and experiences, continues to shape the contemporary characteristics of educational work with adults. That is probably the reason why in the monograph we can find many references to the ideas of P. Freire and various forms of work derived from the approach of the creator of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed adopted in various groups and communities. The key to their descriptions, the authors of the monograph made the practices of being with others and being among others. The message that everyone can contribute something important and creative to the life of the community breaks with the vision of the grown-up subject as "incomplete" and "flawed", which is characteristic of the modernist version of the compensatory education. It allows us to think of a human being with all sorts of difficulties in building relationships with the world as a reason to reorganise our thinking about what this world is like and what our relationships and ways of communicating with each other are all about. Perhaps we have become too attached to the vision of a world that is already heading only in the direction of development as understood in terms of progress, growth, and prosperity. The question must always be asked about whose progress and what kind of prosperity would be involved? The authors of the monograph clearly remind us of this when they write about the presence of people with dementia, who, after all, are and will be in our communities, about the emigrants who keep coming to Europe and have been shaping its identity for many years, about the inhabitants of many regions who have never been in the geographical and political *centre* but rather on the periphery of the *civilised* world. A certain educational solution here could be a social practice known as popular adult education which means mutual respect, based on equal relations between subjects, recognising discussion and debate as a natural form of learning. Both in the past and

now, it has become the personification of democratic education. As such, taking action to expose the various meanings that adults give to the reality in which they function represents its real meaning, and thus implies the necessity of diversifying forms and practices. However, the problem of today is the strong subordination of education to one dimension, which is economic profit and meeting the criterion of preparing human resources for the labour market. When we talk about education we think mainly of its adaptive version, a person is supposed to be socially useful (perform the role of an employee in a proper manner) and economically suitable (generate income). This economic language dominates the way we describe any educational endeavour to such an important extent that even people of education exclusively "manage competencies" instead of thinking about their real meaning and significance. This makes it a measure of the value of individual competence to act in accordance with the scenario of the global economy also in the social sphere, and the lack of effective (planned by the markets) results of the activities undertaken leads education organizers to see the subjects, including adults, in the context of the need for their educational *intervention*. Emphasising the adaptive nature of education makes us think that we have to fit into the world that is, meanwhile, the essence of democratic education is to constantly ask about the quality of the world in which we would like to live, or perhaps the one that exists now is captivating us with its quality.

Critical competencies

In a number of sections of the monograph, its authors insist on the need to be a critical adult, a critical learner, a critical citizen. The essence of being critical is presented here as a prerequisite for consciously functioning in the world, not to be subjected to manipulation, populism, fake news, and the prevailing media reduced to a single dimension. It is also an expression of concern for a better world that is fair and safe. Underlying critical thinking is the belief that these are the essence of democracy and that it (democracy) requires adult competence to legislate it. Critical thinking allows one to expose manipulation, make independent decisions, and not surrender to indoctrination strategies. The power of critical competence is the ability to be self-determining, to be a reflective and autonomous subject who does not accept something "that is commonly known" (*cf.* Snyder, 2019; Applebaum, 2020). Education that has this criticism in it can develop in universities, but ones that will be committed to creating a variety of ways of knowing, showing that knowledge is created and represented in different forms and by different subjects. Being critical can also make itself present in various forms of civil disobedience, in actively becoming a citizen on the street, in acting in

NGOs, in making public the actions of socially de-favoured groups fighting for social recognition through various means and cultural practices. One thing seems to be common – in this view, critical thinking is seen as the essence of learning and education rather than its function.

Socially engaged researcher

The authors of the monograph emphasise that today there is no place for a university that conducts research for its own sake and limits the publication of its achievements to academics. Academic knowledge makes sense if it becomes public knowledge, and social research, including educational research, is carried out simultaneously in association with various communities and organisations. This is not an easy task, nor is it so far omnipresent. At the policy level, participatory research has its tools when it comes to controlling these processes with the participation of transnational organisations like UNESCO. At the level of individual research practices, they require advanced methodological competence concerning-as one of the monograph's authors says (Lepore, Sharma, Hall & Tandon, 2022: 84) in presenting the principles of collaborative projects-not so much research on people, but research with people.

The traces of this involvement are recognisable in the examples, reported in the monograph, of research. Though by no means in the sense of classic participatory research, their authors reach through narrative biographical stories into the micro-worlds of subjects engaged in the work of changing the world, their immediate environment, their identity. These include climate advocates going out on the street, community activists, mediators working in expatriate communities and trying to recognise their experiences, and next-generation adults referring to the identity of the re-settlers. The sort of change that occurs in the individual subjects (narrators) revealed by the researchers shows the constant balancing between the individual and the social in the subjects' biographies. By recording the processes of change, the researchers arrive at individual descriptions that give a chance to reconstruct the various contexts of adult learning in new circumstances. That is, learning to express disagreement with the devastation of the environment and the politicisation of the process, and learning under the constraints of the struggle for existence, learning to settle in new cultural, economic and social circumstances, learning on the terms of constant return to the past as a building block of identity here and now. Simply putting the matter in such a way as to look at learning as a socio-cultural process, which reveals itself the more we are oriented to study it participatively, is not in particular either a new discovery or cognitively original (Elliott, 2007). On the other hand, making participation a theoretical perspective for

describing learning, especially in the critical dimension that reveals the political and economic mechanisms of power and its establishment, I take as an implicit value of the considerations presented in the monograph.

An attempt to summarise

During the past three decades, it is hard not to notice that reflections on adult learning and education have been dominated by the neoliberal discourse of economic success and economic growth as the unquestioned goal of development of societies around the world. Education, in its broadest sense, was supposed to be an instrument directly leading to this goal, and the designed strategies and ways of implementing them in the background of big politics were supposed to legitimise this goal. In many critical analyses of the goals of education and its very essence, posing the question in the above manner is considered – to put it radically – a mistake or at least exaggeration. A mistake, because education simply by its very nature has a social character, that is, it is meant to work together, to develop the spirit, to build relationships and sensitivity to people and the wider environment – and therefore its goals cannot be described only in terms of individual or macro-structural gains. Solstice, because this march towards economic development, which has been going on for several decades, has not ended successfully for everyone to the same extent, and on top of that it has done damage to many areas of life like citizenship, ecology, democracy (*cf.* Applebaum, 2020). One would like to say-no matter how many times officials describe the tools for implementing LLL policies and how many more 21st century core competencies will be on the list-as one education theorist Gert J.J. Biesta (2013) says, good education is always a balancing act between what is and what could be. We must assume, then, that education will always be a risk-but not the risk that we may be educating people in specialties that are inadequate for the market, or that there are not enough of them, but the risk of whether we, as researchers and educators, leaders, members of small and large communities, will be able to inspire each other's thinking, invite each other to learn through diversity of ideas, identities of concepts, horizons, common action, and whether we will be able to appreciate differences. The problem, then, is not whether there is a single model of good education ready to be consumed, but whether we are ready to create it and make this effort in a particular place, environment, in a particular situation, regardless of the difficulties and, in fact, despite their existence, out of concern for the quality of the world and the relationships within it.

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