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FIVE ESSAYS ON DOING RESEARCH ON ADULT LEARNING IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC AND WAR: THINKING ALOUD

It is easy "not" to save the world, an Italian writer remarked at the end of 2022 (Piccolo, 2022). Saving the world is *difficult*. But serious researchers who seek to do just that are not going to be moved by current world crises to stop doing their research. The seriousness of the research they do is an obvious reason for pushing on. Another is that they are committed, concerned people who take their work very seriously, passionately even. They are, of course very different by professional formation, cultural-linguistic background and temperament. Age, as well, and gender separates, differentiates them. They are united in their common praxis, however, which – to borrow the words of Bernie Grummell and Fergal Finnegan – can be described as "the craft of research as a practical, ethical and theoretical endeavour" (Grummell & Finnegan, 2020: 1) whose common driving force in many cases is a democratic and collaborative ethic which seeks to identify and foster progressive transformative possibilities for individuals, communities and society through research, teaching and learning (Grummell & Finnegan, 2020: 2).

The crises that are universally seen as piling up in a seemingly endless series of threatening catastrophes imperiously demand a response from us therefore as researchers.

The question and the context

Writing the invitation for essays, I sketched in the darker sides of the global pandemic and then dwelt a little on some of the gleams of hope or movements for change that had begun to form in the days and months of lockdown and insecurity in 2020 and 2021. I suggested two classic songtexts as mottos for the light and dark: Joni Mitchell's *Both Sides Now* (1969) and Bob Dylan's *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* (1963). 2021, looking back, in many places was a year of zoom-conferences, a year of hesitation and caution, and caution and distance became carefully guarded habits, so much so that opening up again in 2022, for many, posed threats that only 24 months earlier would have seemed surreal. These years have been hard and for very many the hardship continues implacably. Many and much have been lost, and in these days the losses, from different causes

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now, continue with deadening monotony. But some things, as Joni Mitchell sang, were/have been gained.

In most cases, arguments for change were there, being ignored or drowned out, and the pandemic paradoxically or not generated space for alternative thinking (see for example Caride, Gradaílle & Varela Crespo, 2022). And that goes on, too. Confidence in democratic representation has taken a further beating while populism, *post* fascism even, and dictatorship, of course, are enjoying success in many countries, but people reorganise themselves and find different roads, and they go on doing it, re-inventing democratic activism against all the odds (Israel, Brazil, Belarus, Italy come to mind as I write this in early 2023). The broader picture admittedly looks desperately frustrating and there is everywhere bitter need for change. Two years of pandemic revealed the terrible deficiencies of the health and education sectors in every society[1] and the need for a concept of health that "goes beyond preventing health crises and is closely linked to a holistic vision of health and to the associations between health, environmental quality, climate, food and agriculture, and biodiversity" (Lefrançois et al., 2023). The impact of the lockdowns everywhere was felt in the metropolises and in the country, in the comfortable rich world and the world of the townships and settlements in contradictory ways, but lessons for sustainable urban life for 55% of the world population and a certain tenuous sharpening of focus on the global climate crisis were moments of the crisis, however inconsistent and inadequate they remain (worldbank.org, 2021). A sharpened sense of social justice, justice for all, in the global North as well as the global South, and the central role of the global climate crisis have been stated, albeit hesitantly, at UN level (un.org, 2022) but more consistently and urgently by activist organisations such as Fridays for Future, Greenpeace, Global Citizen or newer initiatives such as Extinction Rebellion (Gontarska, Rudnicki & Zańko, 2022). So much for Joni's *Both sides Now.*

Shortly before starting the call for the essays collected here, however, the general atmosphere darkened. Dylan's lyrics become more harshly fitting. Looking around from 24th February 2022 on, we saw with his words "a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin'" (and this was long before gruesome Telegram videos of sledge-hammer executions were distributed by Wagner mercenaries in Russia). War came, or rather *this European* war. Demodernisation of a great swathe of eastern Ukraine – "demodernisation by missiles" Forostyna calls it (Forostyna, 2022) – and massive migration and displacement for generations to come. But war, of course, is nothing new. This one, however, has re-proposed 70 years' worth of the global North's military and diplomatic

[1] "No less than 55 countries are struggling with serious health worker shortages as they continue to seek better paid opportunities in wealthier nations that have stepped up efforts to recruit them amid the COVID-19 pandemic" (un.org, 2023).

discourses and practices. And has sharpened awareness of war and its social and human costs for millions who have slumbered happily through countless *distant* wars and conflicts or learnt to take *their* peace as given (Habermas, 2023). The long shadows of this war became abruptly the harbingers of grave problems of food security, increased economic hardship, and conflict, which, while already beginning to be felt in many places, was still over the rim of the horizon in others, but coming on for sure as the essays collected here were being written.

In any case, just as we learned in the pandemic – in different ways and at different speeds, no doubt – to take account of masses of new concerns and new behaviours towards one another, we have been learning lessons, too, as a result of this European war. More of the lessons are ugly than uplifting: the dilemmas of martial pacifism for many traditionally anti-militarist movements (*e.g.* the Green Party in Germany, the ANPI partisan movement in Italy); the crass division of war effort and war victims by gender (Bahous & Grynspan, 2022; Hietanen et al., 2022); the "weaponizing" of migrants, of rape (Ukrinform, 2023), of hunger, of language; the paradox of the extraordinary welcome of millions of displaced Ukrainians set against the continuing, strident, lethal war against migrants by land and sea. Yet there is also the real solidarity and sacrifices made by so many individuals and communities. For all these reasons it seemed a good idea to look beyond. To what is happening around us, and beyond. Beyond, even if that meant "back", or "inward". To pick up the voice of the researcher in the midst of these crises, *in flagranti*, so to speak. For this purpose, an invitation to write an essay, to be more precise a research essay, was sent out.

Why an essay?

Michel de Montaigne, presenting his first volume of essays in 1580, put it like this:

> This, dear reader, is a work in good faith. From the very beginning be assured that I have no aim other than to be personal and private. I have no interest in serving your interests or my own fame. […] I wish to be seen in my simple, natural and ordinary way, without frills, because it is my own views I wish to portray. My faults will be clear enough (Montaigne, 2009: 117, author's translation).

This was an invitation, therefore, to write an essay piece for this journal. Pieces that take an essay-like form, I thought, could allow the author to be seen in their simple, natural and ordinary way. No, or few, frills. This means the essay is essentially an argued piece that discusses and turns over thoughts and ideas that have come up or are opening up right now and which the author would like to develop and share. The essay format was meant to allow a great deal of freedom in the choice of method, whether argumentative, persuasive, analytical or contemplative. I wrote:

Being essentially essay-like, the piece is unlikely to be a piece of research, though it will naturally start from your *researcher practice* and will certainly *reflect* on your practice. You will likely want to report and reflect on what you have done, what you are doing and why it is important. On what kind of research you generally do, what it requires, what makes it so important in your view (we can assume that *you* do, but others may not see that). What makes doing it difficult, perhaps? What does it try to explain and change? What is it, you or you and your co-researchers most want to air and discuss? What are the ideas that are calling for more open discussion? What are the areas of research that need to be concentrated on, or if they are emerging, need to be opened up more?

Of course, the "toolbox" of the everyday research paper should be indicated clearly:

Therefore, you should definitely refer to your own research, different phases or aspects of it, perhaps, as well as the research of others that has been or is important to you. Your most lively concerns may be very local. All the more reason for airing them and pushing them out for others to know about your concerns.

With the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic in mind, and thinking in terms of the war in Europe, the new refugee crisis (Ukraine, of course, but Afghanistan, too, after the abandonment of Kabul in the summer of 2021), and the food security crisis, I wrote:

What has changed for you in your research, in your research context? […] How are you already reflecting on the changes in your work, in publications, in events you are planning? What have you done, what have you not done or been able to do in the last 2 years (what are you itching to do)? How do you see your area of research moving forward to address the global problems of 2022 and on?

It was mid-2022 when the invitation to write went out. I wanted answers to this question:

Ultimately, what do you most urgently want to discuss with others *now*? What arguments do you want to see out there *now*?

The "now" was felt to be a moment of unusual urgency. Something of this urgency is suggested by Jay Owens (Owens, 2023) in his discussion with the artist and writer James Bridle about more-than-human intelligence:

We're all desperately searching for a way of making sense of a world that has clearly gone quite horrifically in the wrong direction and is proceeding further in that direction all the time," Bridle argued, "And so there's a need for new knowledge and new understandings. We need to build those actively. It requires thought, it requires the construction of new models and metaphors of how the world works.

We live in a doubly existential moment. We have named an entire geological era, the Anthropocene, for our abilities to terraform the planet – and yet we fear that we are unable to terraform our own culture enough to make it compatible with sustaining life (Owens, 2023 n/p).

The authors of the essays offered here, in their different ways, can be heard trying to make some sense of the world, and they each offer a view of a different part of that possible sense and how to change things.

I shall introduce the essays according to an order of descent from epistemological clarity into methodological uncertainty. There may be something Dantesque about this, proceeding from the First Circle (the World and Europe), to the vast circle of women and gender, descending further into history, war, memory and community, then to a lived life, profession, collegial research and biographical questions, and finally to an exit out of the dark in a deconstruction of the dynamics of othered identity. I am grateful, however, to the authors for allowing me to propose this passage of life, research and knowledge.

The authors and the essays

The first essay is by Licínio Lima, who is Full Professor of Sociology of Education and Educational Administration at the University of Minho, Portugal. Licínio is a researcher of international standing whose work many will know. He is guest professor in various universities in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America and has participated in many international research and co-operation projects. At last count he was the author of academic works published in eighteen countries and seven languages, including more than thirty books.

In his contribution, *Democratic adult education as a research problem in the context of post-democracy*, Lima discusses policies in relation to changing conceptions of democracy, and also of "post-democracy". Concentrating in this text mainly, though by no means exclusively, on the EU, he observes that the dominant political discourses, very much so in the European Union, have been influenced by technocratic conceptions of Adult Learning and Education (ALE). As a result, he argues, participatory democracy is eroded by the impact of elitist theories which subordinate ALE to a sterile, empty formal democracy with hetero-government by "specialists". The post-democratic discourses in ALE policies in the EU and globally have weakened the chances of an "educated democracy" and a knowledge democracy open to diverse educational epistemologies and forms of knowledge. To understand the processes that have led to an erosion of democracy in ALE policies, Lima proposes the study of the impacts produced by new meritocratic ideologies and expertocracy, that are connected to discourses about the global race for talent.

These new policy-document ideologies have little theoretical density and ultimately silence the broad and diverse concept of education typical of popular and community education, social movement learning, participatory research, and learning through

activism. Investigating the erosion of democracy in institutional policies and mainstream discourses about ALE, Lima argues, is today an urgent *démarche*. We are facing times of illiberal democracy, climate crisis, pandemic and war, and that demands from researchers, he says, more than ever critical analysis, especially in times of post-democracy.

Darlene Clover, who offers us the second essay, *What are adult education and research for? Researching (and) the feminist imaginary,* like Lima is very much focused in her work on identifying and disrupting the problematic (gendered) representations and narratives that proliferate in most of the world's institutions of education and culture, as well as across society. She is Professor of Adult Education and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria, Canada. Darlene Clover is a globally recognised authority in her areas of research and teaching, which include feminist adult education and leadership, and arts-based adult education and research methods. In her essay she discusses the aims and methods of a SSHRC project focused on feminist imaginary as a pedagogical tool for epistemic justice and change in which Darlene and a group of feminist scholars and museum practitioners from Canada, Korea, Bangladesh, Albania, Germany, Egypt/Netherlands, Spain/Argentina, England, Scotland, Senegal, Costa Rica, and Chile will be working together for five years.

As an academic teaching courses on critical theories of adult education, Darlene Clover explains how she employs arts-based teaching and research and facilitates community workshops worldwide. Working across formal and nonformal spaces for Clover is central to the social responsibility that academics in adult education have in working for change, and equally, stems from the conviction that theory and practice need one another. Theory, she points out, enables us to see more deeply and clearly into what is taking place in the world or what we are being taught to see and to believe about the world.

Clover poses the strategic question: What are adult education and research for? Context is all. Clover's context as a feminist adult educator is our highly inequitably gendered world. Her response to the current mesh of recent crises is to see in them a steady rise of a global patriarchal backlash of fundamentalist and fascist agendas across the globe, which are everywhere threatening the gains made by women and LGBTQIA communities.

She maintains that feminist adult education and research must be 'for' radical gender and social justice change, for the disruption of patriarchal knowledge, for the fight against "epistemic injustice", and for new imaginaries for women to make sense of and story the worlds they inhabit. Operating as spaces of feminist adult education, Clover argues that women's and gender museums are vital and vibrant sources of the feminist imaginary with the capacity to present, to see and to know the world differently, in ways that can change the imagination of change.

The third essay in this collection is by Emilio Lucio-Villegas, Professor of Adult Education at the University of Seville (where he was formerly Head of The Paulo Freire Chair) and the Research Centre COIDESO, University of Huelva, Spain. He is the author or co-author of articles, chapters and books in Spanish, English and Portuguese. He is a well-known figure in research conferences at national and international level and has a long research history in participatory citizenship projects, urban participatory budgets and participatory action research projects in Andalucìa and the Algarve.

At the outset of the essay, Emilio stresses that the main object of his piece is to reflect on his own research in the framework of his life, his research interests and, importantly, his country, Spain. In the place of a research article, he wants to attempt to write a reflective paper about democracy and how we can help to strengthen it, or alternatively, how it is possible to weaken democracy if we do nothing. His concern – echoing Lima and Clover before him – is centred on the rise of authoritarian and anti-democratic movements and discourses which put themselves forward as answers to the increasing array of crises we have seen ourselves confronted with since the COVID-19 pandemic. In Spain – but we can see this starkly in the total denial of Ukrainian national identity by Russia – antidemocratic ideology seeks in fact to obliterate memory of the Fascist past and specifically of the hundreds of thousands of victims of the Franco dictatorship between 1936 and 1975. Emilio Lucio-Villegas reflects in his essay on the type of research that it is possible to undertake to produce useful knowledge *for* common people and, importantly, created *by* common people, starting from their problems, their realities, or their questions. His question is: how do we build this type of research and what kind of methodologies can be used? In this essay, he considers how recuperating people's memories can be considered an act of emancipation.

Two different research projects are briefly described, both with an approach based on participatory research. The first, around the repression that occurred in the Spanish Civil War and afterwards during the Franco dictatorship, aimed to re-appropriate common history and thereby re-write historical memory. The second project has as its focus the re-evaluation of popular craft skills and professions and examines the significance of the river for a small village in Spain. Lucio-Villegas believes this kind of research can help people to leave behind them what Paolo Freire understood as the *Culture of Silence* and how participatory research can provide tools for expressing their culture and their histories, and as a way to decolonise knowledge and create new knowledge.

We now turn to the essay written by Larissa Jõgi, a researcher certainly well-known for her large body of work on adult professional education and the identity of academic professionals, though her activities and interests embrace biographical aspects of adult learning, teaching and learning in higher education, the methodology of qualitative research and more. Larissa is Associate Professor in Andragogy, at the School of

Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, Estonia. Her academic work and professional experience at the university includes researching, publishing, leading interdisciplinary research groups, and international teaching activities. She is also a member of International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame.

Larissa Jõgi's essay is entitled *A Learning Journey. A Narrative-Autoethnographical Reflection*. Taking up the challenge to write a research essay in these times, she says that she examined epistemological assumptions related to learning and experience, autoethnography, narrative identity and positioning, asking herself what her learning journey could mean and why was it meaningful for her? Accepting from the outset that this kind of question may be impossible to answer satisfactorily, the essay reflects on experience, meaningful moments, and (consciously) positive turning points in the author's learning journey as a scholar, university teacher and adult educator. Becoming and being somebody, she finds, has been a long, lifelong, and emotional process. The essay shows how Jõgi reflected on her experience, using a range of written, dialogical and visual media. For the reflective *writing*, the author employed a narrative and autoethnographic approach, whereby the final essay-writing process was a kind of retelling in the form of a personal narrative. Part of her essay recounts a research project developed and conducted with colleagues during the pandemic. They wanted to know how the COVID crisis affected professional practice and the social position of Estonian adult educators. Out of this and through her reflection in writing, Larissa has seen how as a researcher and adult educator dialogue is an opportunity to interact with herself, with colleagues and with other researchers. What emerges is her own story, yet it can assist others to conceptualise their self, learning and identity. Writing, she concludes, may open new perspectives and provide encouragement to reflect, in a process that is creative, exploratory, reflexive, and able to help us perceive who we are in this world.

Richard D. Sawyer is Professor of Education at Washington State University, USA, where he chairs the MIT Secondary Certification Program. His scholarship intertwines different strands of reflexive, dialogic qualitative methodologies with curriculum theory. His work lies at the intersection of lived self-study methodologies with experiential and situated curriculum. He was a co-originator of *duoethnography* and has written extensively about it. He also works with the methodology of *currere*. Richard is interested in reflexive and transformative curriculum within transnational contexts, especially those related to education and neo-liberalism and homo-normativity. Recent publications include work on duoethnography and dialogic self-study, and he received the AERA Division D Significant Contribution to Educational Measurement and Research Methodology Award for Understanding Qualitative Research: Duoethnography.

Richard Sawyer's essay is called *The Shadows of Liberation: Creating Hope and Meaning in Creative Self-Study Inquiry*. In this essay, Sawyer examines how his experience

isolating at home during the COVID pandemic unfolded as a generative self-study experience. After a chance discovery of old photos and artifacts from his teenage years, he began a *currere* (a self-study of educational and curricular associations) from when he was a high school student. In this *currere* he reconstituted, more than remembered, the past, emphasising free association in the four stages (regressive, progressive, analytic, synthetic) of *currere*. In the essay he shows how he discovered the distortion of his memories in relation to dominant (and marginalising) normative discourses and discusses how these memories had been erased. The result of this discovery was an experience of sudden epiphany in recovering a narrative of joy, hope, and resistance from his youth. This intense self-study carried out in lockdown led into additional projects examining the role of subjectivity more broadly in academic studies which in turn produced publications about curricular epistemicide and erasure.

Richard argues that by engaging in critical self-study research he was able to access and reconstruct memories that gave him hope in the past and that pointed to ways of resisting totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in the critical present. At the same time, he was made aware of the way memory can norm views of history and the past, itself erasing examples of counter-narratives and the more messy, complicated aspects of experience. COVID and lockdown pushed Sawyer to test the boundaries of self-study inquiry and reconstruct experiences of authentic interaction and human connection. Concluding his essay, he writes that COVID isolation helped him see, again, that light comes from within, and that the interior may illuminate the exterior.

Writing (and rewriting) essays

Let us consider, then what these five authors have given us (and what they have not) in these essays. Following (intuitively perhaps, because unknowingly) Michel de Montaigne's words of gentle warning to his readers "Thus, dear reader, I am myself the matter of my work" (Montaigne, 2009: 117, author's translation), all five have in some way, some less, some very pointedly, put themselves in their work. This has been common, of course, in qualitative research writing for some time (Alasuutari, 2004: 600), though it has by no means lost its sense of risk, as underlined by Merrill and West:

> We have also experimented in our writing together in bringing ourselves and stories into the texts: locating our own interest in auto/biography in family history, and, at times, painful lived experiences of gendered and classed exclusions, and psychological suffering. […] Writing itself has also become a place for experiment and even subversion, by rejecting the sometimes rigid, overly scientistic, supposedly objective writing of some, in favour of a visceral enunciation of personal as well as collective experience. This is a deliberate challenge to a masculinist social science (Merrill & West, 2018: 779).

My explicit request, that the authors should eschew the routine, formal format of the research paper in order to talk about their research in general and in connection with that of significant other researchers against the lurid backdrop of pandemic and war was, as you will see, reciprocated only in part and not by all. The research paper discipline runs deep. Notwithstanding, all of the essays are sufficiently discursive and personal to have excited not a little puzzlement among their reviewers, whose task was still to test the pieces for their academic soundness, rigour and the contributions they made to research, in line with the standard guidelines of blind peer reviewing which were applied. One particular criticism levelled at practically all of the essays in their fledgling form was the near absence of overt text structure. The reviewers are to be thanked for this (and for every other criticism and contribution they made, of course) in particular, for their disgruntlement and perplexities led the essayists to improve their arguments considerably. The essay as a text form is arguably by its very nature hybrid (and no one stretched it to its limits more than Montaigne himself), yet the reining-in by the reviewers certainly tightened and sharpened these essays. How successfully, in the end is for the readers to judge.

The essays, then, are not research papers. At least, they were not required to be, even though they clearly aim to meet the normal rigorous standards we expect regarding the respect and use of sources and the exercise of due caution in passing judgement. Neither are they exhaustive or complete in the discussion of their chosen themes. This is something all five authors have already attempted to do and habitually do elsewhere, in other formats, for other audiences. As for passing judgement judiciously, and going as far as the medium can usefully go, Montaigne has something to say about the essay, and therefore it seems fitting to finish with his words:

> Judgement is a useful tool for all subjects and fits well everywhere. For that reason, I use it wherever necessary in writing these essays. […] I never claim to produce an argument in its entirety, for *I do not see the whole of any one thing* (as neither do *those* who promise to show us *everything*) (Montaigne, 2009: 525, author's translation and emphasis).

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