



Thematic issue of RELA: Non-traditional participants in adult education and learning - the (scientific) discipline as agent for change

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When lifelong education was the focus for theory and practice in the discipline of adult education, there was the tendency to emphasize its humanistic dimensions. These were understood as relevant in a multiplicity of contexts beyond school (the workplace, family and civic life, etc.). Adult education and learning could be seen not only as an instrument to better prepare workers for roles in production for the economy, but a path towards conscientization (Freire, 1987), social change and emancipation (Gelpi, 1990). Adult education's connections to social movements (a central feature that can be traced throughout history) allowed forms of action, theory and research for liberation. The focus for the discipline was on groups and populations who were not traditionally participants in education, in forms of education and learning for life. The aim for adult education was as agent for change.

Transitions for the focus of the discipline from education to learning, and from lifelong education to lifelong learning, brought new meanings, new challenges and new forms of questioning. Some authors defended open versions of lifelong learning, centred on learning (not teaching) and contributing to citizenship and democracy. Recent decades witnessed also the appearance of narrower versions of lifelong learning, reducing it to a simplified views of human capital; reducing learning to vocational training, introducing concepts of social competency based on individual responsibility (Lima, 2004), and emphasizing adult education as a function of (labour) market relations. These transitions have diversified the discipline and multiplied meanings of adult education, including a focus on the education and learning of adults who traditionally do participate.

Adult education as a discipline today emerges from past and current influences and in diverse contexts around the world. Meanings are sometimes contradictory, but all carry legitimacy. This configures an eclectic field of research, theory and practice, including different philosophies, principles, or models of action. In this scenario, we feel this is a good moment to challenge our own assumptions over adult education, by focusing our attention on participants, and, most especially, non-traditional participants in education as adults. Some basic questions about such participants we feel should be revisited. Who participates in education and learning as adults? And, who are the ones we fail to engage?

In many countries throughout the world, it is possible to identify who participants in education as adults are, despite the fact that it is impossible to typify them. Quite often participants are middle-class white learners, less than 40 years old with a good educational background, who know at least one language apart from the mother tongue, have some experience in information and communication technologies, and so on. In

some countries, they are mainly male, in others predominantly female. Looking at the question of who they are from the other side of the mirror – who are the ones not participating – sheds light on any assumptions. Are we focussing attention in research, theory and practice on those groups or populations who “need us most”? Should ‘adult education’ preferentially target those who are not participating - the most deprived, fragile or excluded individuals and groups in society? Years ago, maybe this could be considered an important focus. What about today? In some contexts where education takes place, we fail to understand the immediate advantage for those adults who do participate. It is important to consider that institutions, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations or others have their institutional policy, culture and interests. In the same line of reasoning, a wide range of professionals (whether adult educators or not) find their jobs in those institutions and, as workers and people have their own interests. While we assume these interests do coincide, this in fact might not be the case. In short, a second assumption, incorporating all those who engage in education and learning as adults, prompts us to ask, simply, whose interests are being pursued through action?

Non-traditional participants are quite often characterized through their membership of scattered, non-unified and non-homogenous groups. In higher education the non-traditional students are those minorities whose participation is constrained by structural factors - mature students, working-class, cultural minorities or gender minorities (Fergal, Merrill, & Thunborg 2014). Older citizens or immigrant populations are almost by definition either non- or non-traditional participants in learning. Literacy studies call our attention to non- participants whose rights as citizens are severely constrained and who can be encouraged to participate. In most social contexts, there are non- participants who, for one reason or another, become less visible as their voices are unheard. It seems therefore reasonable to suggest that a significant number of researchers focus on non-traditional participants. However, the nature of education and learning processes, the philosophic principles beneath the action, etc., are not indifferent. Is it valid to assume that adult education with a focus on non-participants or non-traditional participants takes into account the improvement of participants’ lives, or the emancipation of groups? Or, is this today a false assumption? Is the (scientific) discipline of adult education focussed as agent for change?

In our synthesis, we are inviting researchers to look carefully to those non-traditional participants in adult education and challenge the assumptions of the field as it is seen today across the various contexts where we live and work. We are therefore calling for papers addressing one or more (but not only) of the following themes:

- Non-traditional learning trajectories
- Research on non-traditional participants in adult education and learning: disclosure, inclusion or emancipation
- Do non-traditional participants change adult education and learning (values, context, relations, teachers, methods, others)
- How are institutions dealing with non-traditional participants?
- Power and adult education in focusing on non-traditional learners
- The role of civil society in the learning dynamics of non-traditional participants



Submissions should be sent no later than the 30th of November, 2014, by e-mail, to ewa.kurantowicz@wp.pl and aalmeida@ualg.pt formatted according to the instructions for authors available at www.rela.ep.liu.se

References

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