

# Communities and Adult Learning in the Making and Remade

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## 1 We Fall Down and We Get Up Again

Looking back in order to look forward is always timely, we can assume, yet it seems particularly fitting – and urgently so – as we move into the third year of the COVID-19 era. The fact is, the arguments we researchers in adult education and learning as a professional or social community were unpacking at the start of 2020 when this particular project got underway have been, to say the least, remixed and re-set as we try to react to the enormous challenge posed by every form of post-COVID projection. The possible outcomes of the war raging in Ukraine as these lines are being written are entirely incalculable and, both locally and globally, are doubtless set to re-define practically all givens from the time ‘before’.

Yet, to remain with the issues that dominated the writing of this volume, and in full consciousness of the sheer unfathomable suffering the COVID-19 pandemic has already brought and seems set to inflict for time to come, we see some things in public discussion and political discourse that are tentatively positive emerging from the stress tests social and welfare systems, education systems, law portfolios on sexual and gender equalities, equal pay, minimal pay, migration and asylum, the future of health and care systems, and so on and so on, have been subjected to. Tentatively positive, it must be stressed. Ignoring for a moment, if we can, the ignorance of populism’s refusals to recognise the gravity of the situation, the fanfares for the easy solutions of ‘smart’ and ‘home’-working, the dreams of solving global warming by everyone simply staying at home (including the children and the basic abolition of the institution called school), ignoring all this for a moment, if we can, the pairing of COVID with the global climate crisis has reset the agenda brutally but lucidly for alternative ways ahead for individuals, communities, local lives and global destinies and the possible contribution that learning and living together can make towards a more just, more meaningful interpretation of the possibilities of learning lives. As Lepore et al. write in their chapter: “All forms of inequalities hitherto hidden within countries and across the globe have become visible

and have been exacerbated. As calls for ‘build back better’ are being heard, it is important not to lose sight of ‘build back equal’, too”. It is in this light, that we wish to close this book with thoughts that have been encouraged by the readings collected here.

## 2 Challenging the Discourses of Utility and ‘Useful Knowledge’

Most of the chapters in this volume directly challenge mainstream discourses of utility operating in education, in social life broadly and that serve in the defence of established, ‘unquestionable’ epistemologies and ontologies. Lima’s critique (Chapter 1) of neo-liberal and liberal social thinking is grounded in a thorough re-appraisal of the concept of dialogue. Dialogical action aims to create and strengthen cultures of openness, democracy and participation, favouring sustainable development. This dovetails with Lucio-Villegas’ proposal (Chapter 2) to reconsider deschooling as an alternative to the much-vaunted ‘tools’ for life or empty ‘qualificationism’. A critique of mainstream lifelong learning demands that we look further than providing merely the “tailored services” that a recent irreproachably positive UNICEF document promises in the post-COVID period to meet the “learning, health, and psychosocial wellbeing” (Giannini et al., 2021) of children and young people, and instead marry learning with a culture of openness and dialogue. This is clearly the argument developed in turn by Zoletto (Chapter 3) and Noworolnik-Mastalska (Chapter 4), in connection with the learning chances, full inclusion and recognition of migrant workers, in the first case, or the difficulties under the dead weight of mainstream learning discourses in Europe to create meaningful frameworks for experiencing and learning citizenship for European youth, in the second.

## 3 New Knowledge, New Society

It would seem that despite the accumulation of experience over decades of struggles for rights and freedoms and the tireless campaigning for gender equality, for the recognition of Indigenous peoples’ rights, for free and equal access to learning and health, and despite the sheer crushing evidence of anthropogenic global climate change, the very real achievements in some places remain still fragile goods. A real, critical practice of inclusion; the respect in practice for the rights of the socially vulnerable; a palpable readiness of society to engage with otherness and learn to embrace a re-drawing of histories, a real remaking of knowledge in order to remake communities of people and societies – all of

this remains to be defended where achieved, or remains yet to be put together, in gruelling piecework threatened at every step. The promises and real hopes, to give just one example, that the notion of vital services to community and society in the pandemic would see a re-evaluation of women's employment with better recruitment, pay and conditions resulting, have (unsurprisingly) already been dashed in at least one major European economy as this is written (Marzano, 2021).

Research aimed at creating and promoting positive social justice outcomes, aimed at reducing inequality, improving the lives of the very people at the grass-roots in communities actually involved in the knowledge production process – as research partnerships between universities and communities try to do (Chapter 5) – is one forceful demonstration of what can be tried and achieved. The creativity and courage involved in building up women's and gender museums (Chapter 6) show very starkly, too, how feminist pedagogies impact with dramatic and unsettling force in central debates to question presences and absences in mainstream pedagogies of lifelong learning. Through such pedagogical practices the world is presented, seen and known differently and adult educators are provided with platforms to incite discussion and unsettle stagnant discourses in ways that can “change the imagination of change”.

This new knowledge for a new society involves above all stressing difference. The most common reactionary response to social problems, however, has always been to exclude and defame. Countering this, the kind of creative andragogy Jocey Quinn argues for (Chapter 7) stretches the usual frameworks of neoliberal *and* radical discourses which, she says, tend to glide over the relational nature of the world we live in. This creative andragogy can, however, offer visions of more than human and more than social mutuality. What does this entail? This posthuman vision of the person not as autonomous, but as connected across multiple forms of matter, people living and acting in and with the whole non-human environment, with objects, spaces, living creatures and the materiality of what makes up virtuality, provides a new way forward for social learning as it demands from us a radically different way of understanding ourselves and our relationship to others, to community and the world. A way forward that can remake the rift between human actions and the natural world, for instance.

#### 4 Social Learning, the Meaning of Activism

It was inevitable that in looking back to look forward we would have to examine what can be done, and how, by whom, and under what circumstances. To

change things, people as individuals and in groups must become active. Clearly, activism has continued and has evolved as global concerns have increasingly entered our lives, no longer at the pace of the evening news or the latest edition of the local newspaper, but relentlessly, second by second in our pockets, handbags, or through our eternal tweets and streams. The evolution of activism, activism to change society for the better, then, is our topic, the activism of the street and the activism of the social media. But more fundamentally, the activism in people's lives and their motives and motivations.

Ligus shows us (Chapter 8) how ideas, values, symbols, collective images, collective beliefs and opinions, accumulated over a long period, as well as commonly shared experience derived from various ideologies of the modern and postmodern worlds have become sources of local ideologies used in constructing a social and/or cultural programme for the members of a migrant community to learn in a community and re-shape their understanding of 21st century localism. Individual and collective experience in intergenerational transmission is constantly reinterpreted, providing a rich source of knowledge, often recovered in the process of social dialogue and informal learning. The potential for transformation in the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, coupled with an opening up to the knowledge of all groups and communities living together in pluricultural societies, can only be guessed at. An idea of how influential such community-based experience can be is discernible in the research Pilch Ortega describes (Chapter 9). Social learning after an earthquake in Mexico is brutally characterised by the struggle to survive but also by social solidarity. The consequences that such crises have for people's lives and the resulting collaborative social practices that can emerge from these crises show in the concrete case presented that, in wake of the natural disaster, social rules and power relationships were questioned by the people. New-found social reflexivity enabled people to analyse their circumstances in order to overcome established power regimes and to create new social practises which respond more adequately to their needs.

Social reflexivity and the decision to act upon newly won understanding or conviction are intensely biographical phenomena. This can be seen vividly in the chapters contributed by Bilon-Piórko (Chapter 10) and Gontarska et al. (Chapter 11) in the testimonies of the activists the authors interviewed. Straddling as these two studies do very different periods of recent Polish history, they help us to see both what motivated these people to become active, what probably keeps them going, and what, too, is able to stall them. Above all, we can see how the transformation of civil society through activism works back on activism in its turn to transform modes and practices, but also the individual and group narratives of why they (want to) do it. The older, lifelong

activist *Krzysztof* that Bilon-Piórko introduces us to is moved by a predictable list of ‘triggers’: sensitivity to social issues, individual personality-related motives, a strong sense of agency, curiosity about the world, aspiration to do something good for the world and a sense of self-fulfilment and personal satisfaction. Nothing unusual in this list. Yet it should be remembered that these internal and external triggers were ‘primed’ by the war and occupation and were pulled by over 40 years of one-party rule in Poland. The marriage of civil activism with party membership was clearly a life filled with selfless educative campaigns and good works. Which inevitably collapsed in on itself long before the system itself collapsed and led to the withdrawal from commitment the author describes. The misfit between *Krzysztof’s* pedagogy of social possibility from ‘before’ and the new times of post-communist Poland in which the activist *Ewa* sees needs and possibilities for change and enters ‘new’ movements with ‘new’ languages of activism underlines how much discourses of action and learning are embodied experiences, causing distress as well as euphoria. The mainly younger activists of the Extinction Rebellion movement are, in the view of Gontarska et al. significantly more the owners and creators of their pedagogy of direct action and civil disobedience. Clearly, they enjoy greater intellectual and organisational autonomy as a result of their activism in the age of social media. The interviews with them reveal their sense of having acquired more radical tools of social influence; they unfold their activism in a simultaneously highly personalised milieu of like minds and in open, mass forms of co-ordinated national and international action; the performativity of their campaigns corresponds to the high sense of self-awareness they cultivate; finally, and significantly, the individual decisions of these younger activists to participate in the movement to halt global warming is lived as an opportunity for self-knowledge and as a source of informal learning.

The activists like *Krzysztof*, even *Ewa*, may seem by comparison a little staid, and the XR activists may in turn seem inward-oriented and somewhat narcissistic, yet the testimonies of these activists, taken together over a period of substantial social upheaval and change, trace the real possibility of moving from a pedagogy of indignation alone to a pedagogy of hope in Freirean terms.

## 5 The Social Pedagogy of Remaking Community

Democratic processes of participation and activism certainly reinforce practices of mutual aid and other forms of social solidarity and in the widest sense action for change always transports blueprints for a future, for the future. The last three chapters of this volume in similar ways sketch in forms

of engagement that offer the shapes of things that can come and speak of prefigurative forms of *vivencia*, of those alternative ways of living together and relating to each other in more mutually supportive ways. Mayo is confident of her words when she writes (Chapter 12) that there are “other, more hopeful – and more sustainable – possibilities, prefiguring the development of new societies in the shells of the old”. This is echoed directly and presciently in the words already reported of a French-Madagascan social mediator interviewed by Evans (Chapter 13) who speaks of the possibility of creating through dialogue and solidarity a space where “*everyone can be a friend to everyone else*”, a space in which community is put back together.

Finally, metaphorically putting the lid on the arguments pieced together by the other contributors, the authors Caride, Gradaïlle and Varela Crespo (Chapter 14) state the really urgently obvious, namely that this pandemic has involved new ways of making communities, and that is certainly a reason for increased interest and confidence, but more saliently it has revitalised experiences that already had a long history of collaboration in local communities. And it has redirected our attention to the community networks created in neighbourhoods and districts. The authors argue that we must recognise their importance and their involvement in the search for collective responses to the public health crisis, which emerged in strength and almost without being called upon to do so during the lockdowns. The virtual communities, too, whose role, they rightly say, “in generating and maintaining social ties beyond physical boundaries was fundamental”. The pandemic took social relations as a whole by surprise; it challenged every social organisation and questioned institutions and values, but it has engendered, too, new ways of communicating, of sharing and of dialoguing. It has made us aware of what we already knew and did; it also made us aware of new ways to do and be. That is something.

## 6 When All Is Said and Done

The necessary adjustments to the text and successive re-writings and re-thinkings as events toppled one over another: COP26 in Glasgow (UKCOP26.org, 2021) and the protests of the young everywhere; the fourth wave of COVID-19 (which was deepening daily as these lines were first written and has since been overtaken by a fifth and possibly a sixth); organised deployment of migrants on the borders of the EU for the purposes of political destabilisation and as bargaining chips in a ‘hybrid’ war – all of these were an essential part of the ‘soundtrack’ accompanying this book from the start, as it is for all socially committed research. And all of these have nevertheless been since pushed aside by

the seemingly unimaginable: the unleashing of war on the European continent in February 2022.

The book is almost finished – at the start of Spring 2022 – and the pandemic still affects our daily life and our ways of organising every type of social process. This influence on social and relational life is dramatic and has prevented many people from leading the social lives they did prior to the pandemic. Mental illness, too, in the forms of depression or anxiety, among others, have increased, including amongst the very young (WHO, 2021). The trauma of war and flight for millions in Europe must now be added to this account. But though this is a problem everywhere, on each continent for very many the dramatic ‘normality’ of conquering every day the basic minimum income necessary to carry on compounds the impact of COVID in everyday life.

Nevertheless, we want to maintain hope. And this hope is based on practices and projects such as some of those this book presents. The self-organisation of people and communities, the act of solidarity, the building of knowledge based on the people and useful for them seems to be the way to implement shared efforts where community action and public intervention create alliances for the common good, promoting dialogue and a community focus when tackling the social challenges that arise.

Looking at the history of our network, we also see how topics in the areas we have discussed over the years change and how concepts, theories and ideas evolve. In our network, we have recognised that a focus on community (in research and educational life) is necessary in order to continue to look at and research adult education with an interest led by clear commitment. Perhaps this approach, too, will soon be slipping away, transforming, changing?

But we are right now still building and re-building our research consciousness and reflecting on the role of researchers in communities. The ethical dimensions of our presence in the communities we study becomes more and more a crucial question. All the more so, as many themes important to community learning will continue to recur and emerge as hermeneutical research challenges. The response of communities in the face of natural disaster and political inequality, for example, is spelt out eloquently by Pilch Ortega in this volume (Chapter 9). Quite possibly the next most pressing research challenge will be situated on this ethical-methodological plane regarding how we as societies face the experience of the destruction and associated atrocities caused by catastrophes like the Russian invasion of Ukraine and how we will study the processes of adaptation and trauma of local communities, the communities of migrants and refugees and their roles in theatres of dramatic conflict at the margins and at the centres of our societies.

The big picture out in the world is currently anything but encouraging. The pandemic is still paramount everywhere. A war in Europe, staggering numbers of refugees and the social disruption they represent, new political, cultural and economic iron curtains falling everywhere demand actions from us and reflection on our contribution to a new possible *vivencia*. This is only complicated by the continuing civil and military conflicts that globally deny on a daily basis the most meagre forms of dignified co-existence between people and peoples. Afghanistan, the Lebanon, Yemen, Mali, Myanmar are some of the better-known sites of suffering and stalemate, where education chances and learning are closed down or regimented under doctrinaire regimes, and whole generations are deprived of their basic human right to learn, and are often forced into hiding, exile and emigration. Emigration, flight, the plight of migrants and refugees on 'our' borders, on all borders, from Bangladesh to Poland to Spain and Italy and Mexico, and their place in sad statistics of sunken dinghies, in the barbed wire camps of Lesbos and Texas, the tent cities of Dunkirk and Kakuma are the content of our newflashes and the ammunition for racist and chauvinist politics. But these facts of our rolling news desks, long before the pictures from Kiev or Kharkiv filled the screens, have long been, too, the cause of fear and uncertainty about the future and therefore a cause of frustration and apathy for many. They ask: what can be done, where is it all heading?

Having taken the time to look back in order to look forward, one thing is patently clear to us: patience and unrelenting determination to go forward for change remains urgently necessary. To close, we answer with conviction that there *are* visible and palpable grounds for confidence, but even more abundant grounds for action, and action that *can* and *does* bring about change.

The notion of "pedagogies of possibility" (Manicom & Walters, 2012) serves very well as a possible vision that can accommodate the desire and the need to contribute to the kind of change the authors of this volume argue for in their different ways. Pedagogies of possibility suggest firstly "a grounded and pragmatic assessment of what is feasible, given the parameters of place, time, and resources" (p. 3). The chapters of this book have sketched in such parameters. Holding high hope and the commitment to our ethical-methodological responsibilities as researchers we embrace the second significance of pedagogies of possibility: a commitment to "that which is yet to be imagined, that which might become thinkable and actionable when prevailing relations of power are made visible, when understandings shake loose from normative perspectives and generate new knowledge and possibilities for engagement" (Manicom & Walters, 2012, pp. 3–4).

When all is said and done, that would be something.



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