EDITORIAL

ADULT LEARNING IN A WORLD ON THE MOVE

The papers in this special issue of Studies in Adult Education and Learning carry us back to some of the moments of discussion and debate that participants at the 9th ESREA Conference of the Network Between Global and Local: Adult Learning and Communities (BGL-ALC) at the University of Lower Silesia (ULS) in Wroclaw, Poland in May 2017 generated around the conference theme Adult learning & communities in a world on the move: between national tensions and transnational challenges.

In the course of the months previous to the 2017 conference and since we have witnessed unparalleled waves of migration across Europe, waves of refugees moving through countries and crossing borders on a scale unseen in Europe since 1945. Over a million refugees and displaced people crossed EU borders in 2015 alone. According to UNHCR figures, in 2018 there are 65 million displaced persons worldwide, 22.5 million refugees under UN mandate, and of the three main countries of origin (South Sudan, Afghanistan and Syria) Syria alone counts for 5.5 million refugees...

The BGL-ALC Network decided to turn its attention to adult learning and communities in this world ‘on the move’ and sought to address in discussion possible responses to the national tensions and transnational challenges we observe and experience in our work. The ‘local’ emergencies, the destruction of civil societies (Syria, Yemen, Ukraine), the bombing of Syrian cities by the Russian, US and in the meantime the Turkish air forces, become ‘global’ experiences in the rafts we see sinking off the coast of Lampedusa, the still overfilled ‘jungle’ camps at Calais, on Lesbos, or in cities all across the Balkans. And these global shocks become again ‘local’ emergencies, local chances, too, as they begin to involve the civil societies each migration wave and each political shock successively reaches.

Responses in civil society have shown the great creativity and the energy that solidarity and the idea of civil social justice, twinned with education, can engender. Countless initiatives sprang up to provide a welcome where state institutions responded tardily, the energies of thousands of volunteers, teachers, guides, mentors and employers galvanised the response of action groups and local communities to develop new forms of solidarity and apply in practice basic democratic citizenship. This response is timely, as we have witnessed contradictory reactions across Europe and beyond from civil and ‘uncivil society’,...
new forms of political turbulence and global dis-order which are putting in question most of the institutions and practices we have perhaps taken too long for granted.

**OUR NETWORK AND A WORLD ON THE MOVE**

In the research fields and methodological perspectives of the BGL-ALC Network, the first thing that can be stressed is diversity, which is wholly coherent with the diversity we face when talking about communities. Diverse communities, we argue, include within themselves all the diversity of the people living in them. Community is a place where conflict and confrontation are the usual thing, and conflict and the way conflict is resolved are substantial elements in the definition of community as a symbolic place. Thus, in our discussions we have reflected on the concept of community and the different roles that it can play in people’s daily lives, either as a place of shelter or as a place of confrontation and debate.

Community is also a place in which to join people. It is a public place where everyday life is developed. In this sense, it can be affirmed that community is a place to learn; a good place to learn about democracy and participation, and a place that is a source for learning and teaching. Community is a place where people create knowledge about themselves, allowing them to transform the community further and improve the life of the people living in it.

The creation of knowledge is an important step to researching and transforming communities, but this creation of knowledge can be done in an alternative way (as participatory research, for example, does) and can produce an alternative knowledge: a liberating knowledge that allows people to understand and transform the surrounding environment and that helps people to understand the world.

Social movements, as well, are spaces of adult learning and development. Social movements can be creators of solidarity and of shared responsibilities. Communities are based on the solidarity among their members, but also on solidarity with other people outside the community. This important move from ‘I’ to ‘we’, in the context of the waves of migration and displacement, chauvinism and xenophobia we are experiencing today, is discussed in our network and is a central element of the papers published here.

In short, we conclude that the most important task is to reflect on social change in a context of migration and flight, the ongoing struggle for social justice, for peace and the right to a decent life in safety, dignity and equality: to reflect on, and to combat, the temptations of demagoguery and chauvinism in a time of increasing disorder, and to reflect on the way adult learning can help people to confront these changes in a participatory and democratic way.

**THE PAPERS**

The five papers included in this special issue of AP have been chosen for the contributions they make to theories of learning in a world on the move. They all ask how adequate our
notions of lifelong learning, international adult education and adult learning programmes are and what the contribution of our research in this field is, should be and can become. They all in their different ways ask how we can build better dialogue and connectivity between diverse people in situations where opportunities for dialogue are being challenged, when in our cities and regions the ‘other’ is frequently experienced as a threat rather than a source of solidarity, learning and enrichment. They propose alternative perspectives on adult learning and discourses of power, on difference and ‘identity’, and new forms of solidarity that further social learning and the creation of democratic forms of citizenship and living together.

Adult learning and the work of social movements, local initiatives, and the responses of state agencies is another important area of debate addressed here. These papers ask how our research responds to current definitions of ‘sovereignty’ within the nation state, and to the takeover of the notion of ‘identity’, seen for many today as the fixed attribute of nations/ethnic groups, and formulated as an antithesis to difference and diversity. These and any other themes which address the relationship between adult education and communities, and the role of local actors, whether individual or institutional, and transnational movements confronting the challenges posed by thousands of people on the move are the stuff of this special issue.

Jim Crowther, of the University of Edinburgh, with his paper entitled ‘The contradictions of populism: reasserting adult education for democracy’, opens the discussion by challenging common assumptions among educationalists regarding the democratic legitimation of populist protest. While recognizing that expressions of popular anger at ‘the establishment’ and the ‘political elite’ are often problematic, Crowther nevertheless considers it essential to ‘recognise the legitimate democratic aspirations of people who have been victims of globalisation and ignored by liberal democracy.’ He argues that we must look for ways to conjugate these expressions of anger and frustration that easily lead to the search for a ‘strong’ Trump or Le Pen-type leader figure with adult education as a resource for deepening democracy rather than simply dismissing and condemning popular reactions as unwarranted and small-minded. Drawing on the work of Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe, Crowther argues that we can use the creative force of dissent to turn the crises of democracy and adult education to use in generating productive synergies which adult educators need to develop. Reasserting adult education for democracy creates an opportunity to reinvigorate adult education and to reinvigorate democracy. Crowther supports his argument by examining developments during the Scottish Brexit debate. The discussions around such notions as sovereignty, ‘patriotism’ and community identity and the numerous forms of popular action that were created in order to carry forward an open, democratic debate illustrate in his view the impetus for new forms of political learning and education which adult education needs to engage with. Adult education, globally and in the Scottish context Crowther discusses, is in serious danger of remaining isolated from social struggles by being kidnapped by dominant policy agendas which have little to do with democracy, social justice, equality or
freedom. Adult education, Crowther insists, must connect once more to its historical roots of being an ally for enhancing democratic life, and must go beyond the limits of liberal democratic versions of democracy.

Adult education has to be involved in history if it is to save its own soul. Its historic role is in promoting an expansive and inclusive democracy which can contribute in turn to the revitalisation of adult education.

Sylwia Słowińska’s paper ‘Bottom-up cultural initiatives in local communities – between retreat and social engagement’ looks at the ways in which the creators and organisers of bottom-up cultural initiatives in local contexts shape relationships with the local community. She presents five ways of shaping relations with the local community. These can, the author argues, be located on a continuum between two poles: retreat (distance from the community) and engagement in its affairs. The findings of her research suggest three models of bottom-up cultural initiatives: enclave, niche and platform initiatives. The suggestion is that all three types of bottom-up cultural initiatives clearly provide opportunities for learning in local communities, but ‘platforms’ – activities open to collaboration and community participation – are more likely to create a space for education which is strictly connected with the needs and problems of the local community.

This research on bottom-up cultural initiatives was carried out in 2012, in western Poland employing in-depth interviews and observation. Słowińska’s data covers 16 cultural initiatives, carried out respectively in villages, small towns, and in cities. Polish society is understood by Słowińska as ‘liminal’, as a society in which patterns and social norms coexist that are characteristic of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ orders. As with other societies where the pace of change was or is very fast over a relatively brief period of time, the resulting ‘hybrid’ character of social and cultural reproduction is of enormous relevance for the development of citizenship and democratic community education. Research into bottom-up cultural initiatives is of special interest in times of increasing social non-commitment, of withdrawal into the private sphere and a weakening of the idea of citizenship. The construction of a democratic civil society in Poland, Słowińska writes, is an arduous affair and she notes the weakness and fragility of civil society, and emphasises the importance of initiatives that can couple community participation with adult learning chances.

Emilio Lucio-Villegas, in ‘The river and the people. An approach to memories, craft and adult education’, presents work in progress on people and their traditional crafts, their work and lives on the banks of the river Guadalquivir in Spain – simply called the ‘River’ at the centre of this piece of research – and argues for the recovery of the memory of the community and of the craft memory, both threatened by the forces of globalisation with their accompanying features of labour migration, redefinition/destruction of professions and labour patterns, education for qualification, economic peripherisation, and so on.

In this paper Lucio-Villegas’ interest is turned towards the human, symbolic and geographical territory on the banks of the River. Recovering the integrity of the lived traditions and continuing practices of this territory can be a generator of experience and
learning, the author argues. Experience is related to individual and community identity as an element which enables people in the community to understand and communicate the way they establish relationships amongst themselves and with their environment. In these first results of his research on the River, Lucio-Villegas discusses the crafts associated with the River; the use of the River to transport goods and people; the family ties associated with the craft; the increased mobility of the people of the River as an effect of globalisation/cosmopolitanism and the changes derived from it. A notable role in the life of the River, he shows, is played by the women of the River community and by elements of magic and mystery handed down over years of work and life on its banks. Lucio-Villegas indicates the importance of recovering traditional crafts as a source of adult education and for the maintenance of a cultural identity threatened by globalisation processes. By re-discovering, recovering and maintaining these traditional crafts it may, he suggests, be possible to enhance traditional knowledge and the resources of community. This kind of adult learning is clearly opposed to lifelong learning policy-making that is only focused on the individual as a worker or a future worker without memory or history. Lucio-Villegas’ paper finishes with a clear challenge: to react against policies that dehumanise people, with Freire, we have to reconstruct local cultural identities that allow people to become protagonists of their life-world and their community life.

Marta Gregorčič, of the University of Ljubljana takes up this argument in a paper that sets out to challenge not only the threats to the life-world and knowledge of people in their communities, but also explicitly takes issue with the bias in ‘Western’ mainstream social science in general, and in the research of our own networks, in particular. Thus, in ‘Silenced epistemologies: the power of testimonies and critical auto/biographies for contemporary education’, Gregorčič asks whether the narrators of witness accounts or of critical auto/biographies can also be recognised as (co-)authors of scientific or literary written records. Reflecting in this paper on her own biographical research with revolutionary movements of the Global South as well as oppressed and silenced groups in different continents, the author has identified characteristics of testimonies which she has positioned in relation to Santos’ Epistemologies of the South. Using prominent examples of literary written records which have empowered social emancipation she shows how the pedagogy of testimonies can be used innovatively for learning and research, and also how testimonies can make a fruitful contribution to a much-needed consideration of what she terms ‘silenced epistemologies in the classroom and in society’.

Witnesses of social injustice, of human rights’ abuse and war are often not merely sources of information, but are as well the bearers of ‘specific’ expertise, knowledge, and sometimes even epistemology, the author claims, indicating ways of coming to an alternative scientific understanding of the world. In the same way, following Stanley and feminist research methodology, witness accounts and autobiographies cannot be anything but inter-textual, discourse-responsive, and inter-subjective. The question of a research subject’s authorship and co-authorship of new epistemology, or at least a part of an epistemology, has not been theoretically explicitly addressed. However, sociologists, educators,
journalists, and others have already introduced this idea, and had witnesses recorded into or directly sign the scientific and/or literary work.

Gregorčič’s argument is trenchant and some may find it one-sided. Many researchers – particularly those coming from the area of auto/biographical research will respond that they have been practising the recovery of silenced epistemologies in the ‘ghetto classrooms’, institutions, the family, in communities of native populations, at least since the work of hooks, Rockhill, Steedman, Lather, to mention but a few who come to mind. Her trenchancy, however, is both justified and salutary, we feel. The dilemma of language and the ‘right to speak’ makes itself felt often enough in the most comfortable of research communities, and the epistemologies that clothe themselves exclusively in ‘Western’ Anglo-Saxon formats – see the citation indexes that rule our academic lives and our work – and prioritise forms of English writing and discourse must be challenged, by us, and Gregorčič makes here a valuable start.

“Rewriting sociality” – sociographicity as a concept for comprehending emancipatory practice and social change’ is the title of the last paper by Angela Pilch-Ortega of the University of Graz. This final contribution challenges, too, notions of learning that are normally focused on the learning individual and learning for profit, for self-interest, for individual self-actualisation. Pilch-Ortega writes that in a world on the move, questions of democratisation, solidarity, dignity, equitable distribution of resources, opportunities for life and learning are becoming increasingly important and evermore urgent. In this context, she writes, social problems in societies due to dramatic changes and grave social disparities are not only seen as individual problems but are also framed as supra-individual challenges which call for the creation of collective modes of coping and learning. Given the generally accepted view that social movements can have an emancipatory and innovative potential for societies and social change processes, she focuses in her paper on ‘civil learning’, emancipatory practices and processes of social change. Pilch-Ortega wishes to theorise learning processes which are layered on a supra-individual level and which are related to communities and societies. To do this, she explores the social world as a relational sphere that arises between social actors and the interplay between individual and collective modes of learning. Her argument is that our research frequently overlooks the relevance of collective modes of learning for social change processes, and that civil spheres and new learning environments offer opportunities for a learning society. Equally, she finds that much theoretical work neglects the relevancy of intersubjectivity and over-emphasises either the structural or the individual perspective in the processes of sociation.

Pilch-Ortega points out that as members of societies we have to deal with the doxic assumptions and pre-reflexive knowledge with which we navigate through our daily lives, in the process reproducing the status quo of social regimes. There are in this coping nevertheless important opportunities for breaking the circle of reproduction and for creating moments of critical reflection, which may lead to emancipatory practices and social protest. Here the author introduces the term ‘sociographicity’ as a draft concept which tries to map such processes of ‘rewriting sociality’. By interacting with others we create
the social world which arises between us. As, to a large extent, social relationship regimes are reproduced by implicit knowledge structures, by our ‘re-writing of sociality’ we can transform figuration patterns through critical reflections on a shared world. Pilch-Ortega argues that the practice of rewriting sociality should best be conceived as an ongoing process which is relational, interdependent and contextualised. This has consequences, she writes, for the question of how to theorise emancipatory practices and agency in order to (a) prevent the continual reproduction of Eurocentric perspectives on emancipation, (b) counter tendencies to overemphasise agency as an individual phenomenon, and (c) rethink the collective as a figurational structure which is constantly progressing.

With this eloquent paper, grounded in an existing body of research and pushing forward the boundaries of our research thinking and practice, we close this selection of papers. All five in very real ways offer a photograph of the state of our discussions at present. All of them, too, throw up important, imperative challenges to our field of work. The common theme is the search for learning perspectives in a world on the move that are focused on new, open, shared, learning opportunities which are embedded in community and group learning for social change. The challenge to certain global pressures, the challenge, too, to Western-centred perspectives can be clearly heard in these papers. May the discussion be good.

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