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THE METAMORPHOSIS OF ADULT EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract. Due to globalized economy and 21st century order of things, adult education will undergo dramatic changes the next many years – if it wishes to meet the new challenges adequately.

Traditional classroom based up-skilling and recent decades of “traditional empowerment” will need to adjust to the new paradigms of 21st century learning.

Up-skilling and traditional empowerment are relevant activities only if the challenge is to find a new job; not if you need to create your own job, go entrepreneurial or learn to manage constant change.

The article explains the short-comings of traditional adult education and points to the key elements in emerging adult learning didactics, and links those changes to the European Commission’s Europe2020 strategies.

Keywords: adult education, 21st century learning, European funding, action and community based learning

Adults and adult education - clarifications

Obviously the terms “adults” and “adult education” are very broad almost abstract terms, covering endless groups of people, activities and scenarios of learning and education.

Therefore it is crucial in this context to clarify who and what we are talking about.

The focus of the following reflections is clearly on adults with less educational background, of all ages and with limited access to social and educational mobility. Adult education within this focus refers to formal and non-formal provisions to up-skill, empower, provide basic competences and empower those adults.

A dentist wishing to learn how to paint is not considered in this context, whereas a 45 year old factory worker losing her job definitely is.

In short we are addressing the millions of European adults in difficult and rapidly changing labour market and social situations and the formal and non-formal provisions offered to tackle those challenges.

The problem we address is the exponentially increasing gap between these adults’ competences and resources and the 21st century labour market scenarios: *is what we know as adult education able to respond to this gap?*

The 21st century cultural revolution

Backed-up by reports and forecast studies from stakeholders such the OECD, the World Bank and UNESCO, the European Commission now clearly states that we need to basically re-think education, and that this calls for no less than a cultural revolution in educational policy and practice.

These dramatic words come from a far from revolutionary body, representing almost all European nations, and we should pay considerable attention to this fact alone: what brings the Commission to repeatedly state such dramatic changes? Not adjusting or further developing education, but *re-thinking* education, including its basic axioms and concepts – and role in society?

It seems that the old classroom and instruction based education paradigms produced by the needs of the industrial society has finally come to be obsolete, outdated as well as increasingly becoming an obstacle to change.

Education has become reactionary not in its content but in its form and it is becoming a conservative force in the society countering change.

The cultural revolution will involve educational policy, the places called “schools” and the professionals called “teachers”. Academic and educational legitimacy will be challenged.

All this already started with re-focusing assessment on learning outcomes: not how many books you read, but what you can do.

Less educated adults will welcome this cultural revolution, as they might finally be valued for what they can do, and not how academic they are.

Re-thinking education might offer new and fresh winds for less educated adults, but only “might”. Policy still needs to meet practice.

Whereas re-thinking education might send chock-waves through the academic world, less educated adults will be less chocked, as traditional education never worked for them anyway. They were always marginalized through traditional education; in fact this is why they became less educated. The traditional education system always drew efficient lines between the academic learners and the other ones, and it is still doing so. This mechanism was and is embedded in the most basic paradigms of education, even though increasingly challenges by educational research and experimentation.

Re-thinking education might therefore, at least in principle, open up new doors to millions of less educated adults in need of 21st competences to manage emerging labour market and social changes.

On the other hand re-thinking education is deeply rooted in the dramatic dilemma between short-term labour market thinking and the long-term real competence needs of the adults, haunting most national and European educational actions.

The labour market needs rapidly changing skills and adult education policy needs to respond to that; also to fight increasing unemployment. This caused adult education to go vocational: in short, give the unemployed or the not up-skilled

employed precisely the skills needed to match today's labour market needs.

Such short-term actions are of course driven by labour market needs and reducing public spending.

However justified those short-term actions might be, they do not correspond or respond to the real competence needs of less educated adults. Such competence needs are not skills based, do not respond to specific emerging labour market needs, but respond to the long-term needs of less educated adults to cope with rapidly changing 21st century scenarios.

This dilemma between short-term skilling and long-term competence development haunts most adult education policy and practice, including the European funding programs.

The way this dilemma is managed by policy and practice will determine to what extent re-thinking education will benefit less educated adults.

The original adult education paradigm

In its early forms adult education was linked to enlightenment, aiming to offer working people in the country and later in the industrial cities access to personal and cultural development.

In this form adult education was always non-formal, based on personal interests and never linked to labour market and social conditions.

In the later labour movement forms active citizenship and employees' rights were added, but basically the concept was the same.

Along the history of the industrial and later on knowledge societies, more provisions were offered to allow for example workers, unemployed and migrants to catch up on school learning or to increase specific skills needed in the changing jobs. A typical example is, of course, computer skills.

All these provisions, however different they might seem, are based on traditional classroom and subject instruction, transferring specific skills and knowledge to the participants, more or less like in schools.

As such adult education was not all that successful, pedagogical research were carried out to develop more specific adult education didactics and pedagogies. It was obvious that less educated adults were not benefitting sufficiently from traditional education, and therefore more learner-sensitive approaches were developed, tested and documented.

Following the initial enlightenment, basic skills and civic participation periods, adult education developed in two major directions (still maintaining at the same time the traditional adult education offers): the empowermental and the up-skilling.

The empowermental adult education paradigm

During the last couple of centuries various forms of empowermental adult education emerged, partly based on new migration patterns across Europe, but also based on a critical attitude towards traditional classroom based instruction.

The empowermental approach is not aiming to train certain skills, based on labour market needs, but more focused on long-term personal capacity building, based on the individual's life and work experiences and based on the individuals' talents, wishes and expectations.

Often such empowerment processes ran through long periods, as they often included quite complicated personal change and capacity building. The empowerment processes take into account relevant labour market needs, but are much more life direction oriented than labour market oriented.

Such empowermental didactics represent a big change from traditional or "modern" adult education provisions, and to some extent they have been quite successful, in particular in relation to forced change situations and migration.

However, whereas traditional adult education (including its pedagogic adjustments) remains imprisoned in the industrial instruction parameters, most empowermental adult education seems to remain within socio-psychological mentality processes, normally not confronting the social realities around the mental laboratories.

This might be one of the reasons that such empowermental processes sometimes do not work well for for example long-term unemployed factory or construction workers. After several empowerment courses they simply lose trust in such provisions.

Adult education as up-skilling

The other direction emerging on top of the more traditional civic participation adult education was the systematic up- and re-skilling of less educated workers.

Labour market and social service policy worked together to offer massive local, national or even European up-skilling and re-skilling programs, based on labour market statistics and forecast studies.

In this case adult education is used to adjust the labour force to systematic changes in the labour market, and to direct the masses towards such gaps.

Up-skilling often addressed technology and ICT, whereas re-skilling typically addressed the construction, industrial and healthcare sectors.

However, re-skilling is not an easy enterprise and often the labour market changed before the identified gaps were closed.

It is still an important priority in European funding to bring education and labour markets closer together to prevent skills shortages in the future. Obviously such alert forecasting is becoming increasingly difficult due to rapidly changing labour markets and national and global economies. The education system is not able to keep up with the exponentially changing economies and "skills needs".

The problem in 21st century adult education is precisely whether skills are needed at all – and how empowerment can turn to real change.

Soon many young people will be leaving school with the same problem as less academic learners have been doing for ages: what I learned today didn't help me much in real life.

New adult “education” paradigms

From the historic limitations and deficiencies of these adult education paradigms, new and very different “adult education” is emerging and called for across Europe, questioning the very basic assumptions, approaches and methods in adult education.

In a recent paper I discussed the need to directly deconstruct education to reconstruct or construct learning and creation. Deconstructing is in this context linked to Derrida’s deconstruction philosophy in which old structures do not simply disappear, but are destructured and disseminated across new paradigms.

Deconstructing education seems necessary to enable us to ask such questions as: *what is learning and how does it take place?*

In fact we even need to question the basic elements in what we call “pedagogy”, as it seems that “pedagogy” in its different forms is closely linked to teachings methodologies in instruction, classroom and school institutions.

Perhaps we need to focus more on innovating what is signified by the term “didactics”, if we understand “didactics” as the ways in which learning is basically organized.

Because what is at stake in re-thinking education is precisely reflecting on “how learning is and can be organized” – to be relevant in the 21st century, changing stability as the norm into constant change as the norm.

Perhaps a bit too philosophically, we need perhaps to make sure that we do not make the mistake of replacing one paradigm (“adult education”) with another simple paradigm, as paradigms are now subject to constant and dynamic changes.

A new approach to adult learning should include such dynamics and include re-defining adult learning as an integrated element in future adult learning constructions.

In short, we experience a movement from classroom pedagogy via empowerment pedagogies to what simplified could be called action and community based learning.

We will try to describe the most important elements in such approaches along this paper; however a very important element in this emerging approach is that learning takes place through interacting with, impacting and changing the realities in which the subject acts, thus working to change the individual from an object of change into a subject of change.

Such changes will precisely send shock waves through the traditional as well as less traditional education system, as it will question the very concept of “school” or “education institution”.

Such changes and experimentation will of course call for brave leadership, lately well described by OECD and Fundació Jaume Bofill Barcelona in the book about *Learning Leadership*.

21st century learning

Rapidly changing social and labour market scenarios, communication forms, life orientations and meanings of learning obviously call for a long line of new and dynamic competences, in particular among less educated adults who might precisely not have the resources, the tools or the mentality to manage such change scenarios:

Labour market shifts at least 5 times during an active labour market career

New work forms in the labour market, including integration of work and social life

Managing very different and sometimes unpredictable work situations, including project work, full employment, working from home, considerable periods of learning, unemployment, volunteering and entrepreneurial initiatives

Permanent development of new knowledge forms and content

The need to manage change and emerging scenarios of learning through personal initiative-taking and joining forces with people in the same situation

Social and work scenarios including mobility at national, European and international levels

And including managing the many social changes resulting from such scenarios.

As can easily be seen, such change scenarios cannot at all be addressed by old respondings, such as enlightenment, up-skilling or even long-term personal capacity building.

Less educated adults, no matter the age, are the hardest hit by such dynamics.

We need not sentimentally regret the loss of the old stabilities, as they really never opened many doors to less educated adults anyway. But!

But – it is only possible to view those new dynamics as positive opportunities, if one has the competences, tools and mentality to do so. If not, changes will be conceived as endless threats.

What do *dynamic competences* mean?

A dynamic competence is a meta-competence, but not an academic meta-competence as learning to learn sometimes can be interpreted as.

It is a competence to create competences in constant interaction with practice, communities and changing scenarios; to create knowledge, action, innovation, and new practice ad hoc, on the flight, when needed and not depending on institutional education and training, and to team up with groups of people in joint ventures, from the neighboring village as well as from Korea or Brazil, as well as in constant changing mix realities of digital and social worlds.

Such dynamic competences are needed in the new combination of personal, social and professional life.

Dynamic competence is based on *intervention*: competences and learning is brought about through intervention in the reality.

The old relative stabilities and “phase based changes” of the industrial and post-industrial society are gone and replaced by an exponentially changing global economic energy so strong that economies can alter local, national and global structures in a few weeks. Local is no longer “local”; a vocational training can be obsolete after a few months.

Education “systems” cannot by definition respond adequately to such changes, and therefore the very idea of an education “system” is to be questioned.

Many educations and governments across Europe are responding defensively to these challenges, resulting in stronger and larger systems, more control and centralization, which is precisely what is not needed to become in flow with 21st century realities.

Create your job

Not so long ago, an adult worker might lose her job and get another one. Perhaps some up-skilling was needed, but anyway.

For millions of adults across Europe this is no longer the case: if you lose your job, you will not get another one.

Up-skilling, re-skilling and personal empowerment is offered. But such offers are increasingly powerless.

Many then realizes that the new scenarios call for more fundamental changes and reflections, such as to mentality, life expectations, ethics, the meaning of life and work, creating ones missions, etc.

Such “re-thinking” one’s life is dramatic, demanding and complex.

It is not about acquiring a new skill, but about mentality change, and such a mentality change is not easy if you are 55 years old.

“Adult education” does not offer to guide, support and motivate such long-term change processes. Traditional course structure and traditional funding of adult education cannot respond to those needs.

Holistic, complex, personalized and flexible change support is needed to meet the new realities for millions of Europeans.

An important dimension in such change support is entrepreneurship; not in the traditional sense only, in which you establish your own business, but more in the sense of entrepreneurial mentality: the mentality of *intervention*, of interacting with and changing reality, taking very different forms of initiatives, joining forces, breaking through instead of breaking down, including social innovation, inventing new things and services, greening the community, putting pressure on local governments and private stakeholders. The hyper-dynamic global economy offers endless economic opportunities, no matter where you live and what education you have.

One might cherish or criticize this hyper-capitalistic global economy, but for

the individual citizen it offers endless economic opportunities, and some of those opportunities could even be called “anti-capitalistic” opportunities.

However, to interact in new ways with market, community, policy-makers and private companies, one need to develop dynamic competence: you need to change, learn, create, challenge yourself, join forces, accept failures and much more to be able to benefit from the dynamic economies. One might even need to change other life structures to do this.

In short, and somewhat simplified, one need to gamify life.

The point is, now, that all this cannot be taught, instructed, transmitted and learned in the traditional or modern versions of adult education.

Such dynamic competences, including for example entrepreneurial mentality, can only be brought about by long-term open processes composed by taking action in the community and time-out learning when needed, useful and relevant, no matter if language, technology or financing is on the agenda.

Manage change

One of the most important elements in dynamic competence is obviously the capacity to manage change.

In the old times, such as yesterday, change came about in certain periods. We talked about “times of change”. In the globalized economy change *is* the reality, the order of things. Change is not the exception but the rule; change is a key if not the key driver of economy and social life.

Many years ago clever McLuhan said “the medium is the message”, and today we might say “change is the driver (of change)”!

This calls for mentalities of change: mentalities that do not see change as a threat, but as a new opportunity, mentalities that “live change”, are in flow with change, work with change and explore change.

Change is about one’s occupation, how to learn, how to communicate, how to integrate professional, social and personal life.

This means that a dynamic competence to manage change is not about “surviving change” or “getting through change”, but about the capacity and mentality to “be in change”.

How does this look to an unemployed factory worker, losing her job at the age of 55?

Or to a 43 years old construction worker with almost no useful educational background?

Or to the 34 years old migrant fighting to learn the new language?

So, we need adult education courses about change management, right?

No, not right.

We need flexible, entrepreneurial, cross-sector funded community learning centers, able to host and support such long-term competence development in close

interaction with the realities of work, innovation, social life and the community at large, allowing adults to learn, network and create economy at the same time, constantly taking action in reality (local as well as global) and basing the work principles on *intervention*: changing oneself and changing reality is a dialectic process, even including political action and active citizenship.

Managing change is not a course, but the result of such open and integrated processes.

Europe 2020 and beyond

In times of scarce national funding for such experimentation, one might look towards European funding for such initiatives.

Many important European policies and papers and programs are developed recently, clearly pointing in the same direction as this paper.

Page after page could be filled with quotations and evidence of such 21st century experimentation, and especially in connection with adult education and the millions of unemployed Europeans, and unemployed young Europeans.

However, such adult learning laboratories, replacing the classrooms, are hard to fund within for example the Erasmus+ program.

In fact adult education almost disappeared into vocational training during the design of the new program, but was saved in the last minute.

Adult education is still a strange thing in European funding, living a marginal life and embracing all sorts of activities and ideas, and as always extremely low funded. The Horizon research program offers little support, and the Social Fund will probably be more and more so-called “labour market directed”, meaning up-skilling, re-skilling and other short-term interventions.

Erasmus+ is still very sector oriented and adult education is not a high priority, which contradicts European policy.

It seems as traditional conservatism still haunts the programming of European policy, devaluating the often very progressive and positive policy work: the operationalization of policy into programs seems to reduce innovation.

In short, what millions of less educated European adults need is (still) difficult to fund through European programs.

The attempt to merge adult education into vocational training speaks for itself.

Comparing adult education funding to higher education funding and to Horizon also speaks for itself.

In the dusk of traditional adult education there is a great need for experimentation with 21st century adult learning didactics, be it formal or non-formal – themselves being relics from traditional adult education.

A solid funding of such experimentation at European level is not likely within the Europe2020 framework.

Therefore communities need to join forces to create such experimentation.

Joining forces

Adult education is the weakest sector in European education, and functions as a mishmash of all sorts of activities, not fitting into the other sectors, and with a very low and weak profile; all this mostly due to its history.

In general politics does not take adult learning very seriously.

This is why stakeholders need to join forces and take action, not allowing this important field to be governed by public policy and practice, whether at local or European level.

Open community centers of learning, innovation and entrepreneuring can and should be established in collaboration between private stakeholders, public authorities, social sector players and different forms of NGO's working with young adults, adults or seniors.

The participation of private stakeholders and NGO's will help establish competence development and entrepreneurial mentality in such a center, not falling back to traditional school and classroom structures.

In fact this is what the European Commission calls for: cross-sector initiatives creating hubs, laboratories and working spaces in the heart of the community and addressing all sorts of community needs, interests and innovations while at the same time offering non-academic adults real-life and entrepreneurial practices of learning.

Adult learning and competence development should not be imprisoned by traditional education systems, academic pedagogy or static labour market services (all of which also can be described as power systems, with reference to Foucault), but should be allowed open community based laboratories for learning, experimentation and innovation – interacting closely with private business, creative professionals and drivers of social and societal change.

Such community learning stakeholders might be a bank, a chamber of commerce, a theater, an environmental NGO or a research center.

As a colleague from a learning community in Israel once said: *don't think municipality, think community.*

What less educated adults need

Let us briefly sum up *examples of* what less educated adults and young adults need to cope with the 21st century and to find directions:

- Open community spaces to learn, network, take new initiatives and team up with other adults – with a strong entrepreneurial spirit and open mind-sets
- Resources to insert learning elements when needed, relevant and useful to the adults' missions
- Learning as practical interaction with the community, from business to social services and greening the economy
- Long-term support to follow their interests, talents or aspiration, be it within language, technology, sport or social innovation

- Strong support structures, inserted in their community interaction, to build capacity to exploit all sort of creative technologies and online business opportunities, but always embedded in the learners' own missions

- Flexible work and learning structures, including real-life missions, and mixed forms of employment, project based work and small experiments

- Strong support in the fields of entrepreneuring, funding of ideas and creating economies

- The opportunity to learn and create at different speed, in different ways and allowing both positive and negative experience to be sources of learning.

As can be seen, such environments are not classroom or school based, and competence development is always linked to experimental and experiential practice, intervention and change.

Such centers might be able to transform passive receivers of social benefit into creators of things, situations and services: an unemployed adult is not an underdog begging for a new job, but a citizen missioned to create new opportunities in the community and beyond.

An unemployed 55 year old worker is therefore not a problem, but a resource.

However, this will take a “cultural revolution” in education and beyond, as stated by the European Commission.

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