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Editorial: Approaches to research in the education and learning of adults

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The field of adult education and learning has encompassed research and scholarship from diverse perspectives and these have changed over time. Approaches and trends across this domain of activity perhaps resonate with that of a wider field of education and the social sciences; the intellectual resources picked up at any one time wash through and across these domains of activity. At the same time 'the field' has never been a homogenous or easily identifiable entity. It is therefore difficult to make valid generalizations of the status of approaches within a defined field at any particular time or location. The visibility of what goes on is also significantly limited and obscured. This is partially in that what goes on as research may not be published in identifiably adult education literature, partially in the separation of the field into various foci of interest (adult, vocational, community, higher education, workplace learning etc.) with specialist journals for publication, and partially as a result of the dominance of the English language used for publication; thus a lack of dissemination of research and scholarly writing across language barriers. It is then only tentatively and with caution that any partial picture regarding change in the approaches to research and scholarship in a field of the education and learning of adults over time can be painted.

One might perhaps think it quite safe to follow the language of policy as a framework for analysis of change in approaches to research at the most general level. For example, lifelong learning now appears an accepted and central concept in adult education policy over the last decades in many countries and a major focus of policy in the European Union (EU) and many of its member states. Emerging during the 1960s as 'lifelong education' it was linked to humanist values and ideas of personal growth. In the 1990s, now as 'lifelong learning', it became associated with a shift of policy emphasising competitiveness and economic growth. Lifelong learning became commonly argued within national and wider policies as a necessary feature for individual and collective well-being and a requirement if Europeans are to remain competitive in a global environment (cf. Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2012). However, policy promotion of lifelong learning at this level and its 'insertion' into discourses of adult education over time, never did indicate any direct translation as change in research approach in the field. Rather, over the period from the 1960s, discourses of lifelong learning have been bound up in quite complex ways with policies promoting lifelong education and learning and wider socio-political change and changes in the practices of

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institutions for adult education and teachers and learners in many locations. The targeting of specific groups and objectives for learning through new government funding streams and projects has had no doubt localized effects on research and wider changes in the funding mechanisms for institutions have in some ways perhaps supported a refocusing of research towards workplace learning and informal and non-formal learning. Perhaps partially as a consequence of such wider socio-political change there has been articulated in some quarters within the research community, significant, new and distinctive challenges arising from the internationalisation and intra-institutionalisation of policy and practices and the wider influence of what might be called globalizing processes. However, there is danger in placing too much emphasis on the role of the EU in directing, refocusing or defining research approaches to adult learning, or bringing forth the turn to emphasise learning which has been identified in various scholarly analyses of contemporary change in Western societies. The problem of any temporal narration of approaches to research which starts by considering policy or wider socio-political change is that the point of departure for analysis *is* policy or such wider analysis of change; tending to make them seem more important that they perhaps are.

With distinctively different traditions of and influences to the academic study of the education and learning of adults in the field over the years, generalizations in narrations of approaches to research or change across Europe are bound to be reductive and flawed. The direction of approaches to research and scholarly activity in Europe have emerged in distinctive ways in different geographical locations. Events and trajectories could perhaps best be traced and characterized for the field through a focus on local histories; pursing the question of the intellectual resources emerging and drawn on at different times and places. Questions for 'the field' are then perhaps those over the approaches to research and scholarship that emerge to dominate in differing locations; approaches marginalized in this, the local histories and contestations and struggles for recognition entailed, the limitations and productivities in relation to specific purposes, agendas and concerns and the affordances that emerge with new local developments. This also raises questions about the ability of any 'field' to inquire into its direction or engage critically in this.

In this issue we have wanted to create space for those in the field to highlight their own trajectories and agendas in research and scholarship and scholarly reflections and deliberation with regard to these sorts of questions. In this Editorial we will introduce five articles that draw on theory and traditions from distinct locations.

We are concerned then to attempt to step back from the research and intellectual resources that we perhaps commonly take for granted in the study of the education and learning of adults. We sketch the field, in a fragmentary way, in our own fashion; first, through a short, narration of its history of traditions and epistemology, and, second, in a turn to consider the current appearance of theory in research and scholarship in the field – reviewing and characterizing theoretical orientations drawn on today within four dominant international journals in an attempt to provide a 'thought piece' for discussion. We have no conclusions here, but feel that debate about the direction of the field and its capacity to ask questions is without doubt important. Without better understanding of this dynamic, discursive, political, powerful and historical fashioning of research and intellectual resources in the field, it is not for us clear how current or future directions might be informed or understood. Leaving this discussion to those who would direct research to an effective relationship between commerce and education does not seem to us to be necessarily fruitful. What appears necessary is the

construction of histories of discourse, whereby alternative understandings of what has been might be necessary for the future can be engaged. We can only begin here.

A wide and diverse range of perspectives - field, history and epistemology

Research in the education and learning of adults is then diverse, drawing inspiration from quite different traditions and conceptual domains across Europe. Where it has emerged as a named field, this separation has sometimes been attributed to a conceptual separation of the adult learner from the child that appeared from the 1960s in many European countries[1].

'Andragogy' as the science of the teaching and learning of adults was distinguished from pedagogy in the work of Alexander Kapp (1833) in Germany in 1833. In the 1920s this idea was taken up in the United States by Lindeman and Anderson (Lindeman, 1926) and became known in some quarters through the work of Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s and 80s. However, there are at least two different meanings of andragogy. In the US, through Knowles (1973, 1980), andragogy signified the practice of adult education resting on normative grounds; while in some parts of Europe it came to signify theoretical and empirical research on adult education. In the first decade of this century, the concept is reported as used in Bosnia, Croatia, Poland, Slovenia, and to some extent in Germany and the US (Bron, 2006; Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000).

During the later part of the 20th century, researchers into adult education and learning are often represented quite generally as having taken up concepts and approaches from psychology and the humanities. Where this is seen to have occurred, humanist ideals, with universal notions of human development, progression, democracy, equality and emancipation, are narrated as having shaped a distinct trajectory. More recently other disciplines and domains of research have emerged to contribute theoretical and methodological inspiration; cultural and gender studies, policy studies, and working life research as some examples (cf. Fejes & Salling Olesen, 2010). Research on the education and learning of adults is arguably interdisciplinary, and although perhaps closely related to research in the wider field of education it is perhaps distinctive in its agendas and concerns.

It is through such distinctive agendas and concerns and the historical traditions from which these emerge in different locations that emphasis on particular theoretical and methodological approaches to research have emerged quite distinctively, but perhaps with some common threads of narrative based on what has been observed. Emphasis in approach has been distinctive in relation to geographical location, means of emergence, subsequent trajectory and conceptualisation, but perhaps there has been a propensity for specific approaches to become mobile. The emancipatory work of Paulo Freire, emerging as it did in South America, appears to have had a huge impact on research and policy practice in that location and to become mobilized and taken up in many parts of Europe and elsewhere. A transformative learning theory developed by Jack Mezirow in the US is represented as having significantly shaped research on the education and learning of adults, especially in the US. Biographical research also, prominent now in adult education and learning research in parts of Europe, has spawned the largest research network in the European society for research on the education and learning of adults (ESREA) and numerous publications on the topic. Critical social theory is yet another rich and influential theoretical terrain from which researchers have drawn inspiration for transformative possibilities. During the last decades post-

structuralist theorizations have emerged within the English speaking literature with alternative forms of critical aim.

Research on the education and learning of adults was argued early on not to be a separate discipline, but rather a practical field of knowledge (cf. Hirst, 1974). This raised a question about the relation between theory as knowledge of the field and the status of adult education and learning. How best might it be conceived? If a discipline, adult education would define its own research objects and develop its own theories (cf. Bron, 2006). A debate on this was especially intense during the 1970s and the 1980s, the answers found partially depending on history and location. Empirically it appears that adult education was not confirmed as a university-based subject until professorships in adult education were installed across universities (Bron, 2006). The first professorship in adult education was created at the University of Nottingham, England in 1923 (Bron, 2006), later followed by the instalment of professors in several European countries. The instalment of professors in adult education could be seen as important in consolidating and acknowledging adult education as a separate area of study.

In the epistemological debate about adult education research there have been some who have argued for adult education as a separate discipline. Boyd and Apps (1980) from a North American position, suggested that researchers in adult education needed to stop borrowing theories and concepts from other disciplines and start developing their own. However, they appear to have been quite isolated with this view. Several scholars instead have argued for adult education as a field of study producing inter-disciplinary knowledge (Rubenson, 2000; Bright, 1989b) useful for practice (Usher, 1989).

Hirst's early (1974) discussion of forms and fields of knowledge was used as a starting point for discussion within literature debating adult education (see Bright, 1989a). Hirst distinguished between '[d]istinct disciplines or forms of knowledge' such as physical sciences, human sciences etc, and '[f]ields of knowledge: theoretical and practical'(Hirst, 1974, p. 46). Fields of knowledge were proposed as made up of composites of forms of knowledge, with the field both theoretical and practical. Geography could be seen as a theoretical field of knowledge (the study of man in relation to his/her surroundings), while education or engineering could be seen as practical fields. Elements of moral knowledge – how things should be done in practical affairs – might be included in some fields of knowledge, e.g. education. Drawing on Hirst's (1974) distinction, Bright (1989b, p. 34) argued that adult education research represents an 'epistemological vandalism' which ignores 'the nature of its own activity and content' in that adult education had traditionally seen itself as a theoretical field of knowledge. This Bright (1989b) argued was a mistake as adult education researchers are not true to the source disciplines. Adult education should, he argued, rather be seen as a practical field of knowledge based on and with reflexive engagement with source disciplines.

Usher (1989) was not a proponent of adult education either as separate discipline or field of theoretical knowledge. He proposed adult education as a branch of education, where both were to be considered as socio-practical fields rather than as based on the logic of source disciplines. There was a place for the disciplines, not as foundational but as pragmatic. 'Knowledge in the "socio-practical" is practical knowledge and therefore not the same as the knowledge accumulated and organized in disciplines' (Usher, 1989, p. 67). The starting point for adult education as a socio-practical field is then a '"necessary concern" with purposeful action' (p. 67). The implication being that there could be no restrictions to theory, as theory should help solve problems within a pragmatic view, and with the use of knowledge aimed at solving problems and always related to a context.

This debate concerning the epistemological status of adult education largely took place in the 70s and 80s. However, as Rubenson (2000) notes, there has since been a major shift in what has been going on since then. In the early 1980s, he argues, the question about borrowing from other disciplines and field of studies was a debated issue, as there were strong proponents for defining adult education as a separate theoretical field of knowledge. In the early 2000 this debate has almost disappeared. Instead, attempts are being made, he argues, to include the theoretical work of scholars from other fields into the field of adult education research. This at least can be seen in the aim and scope of RELA which states that 'RELA invites original, scholarly articles that discuss the education and learning of adults from different academic disciplines, perspectives and traditions', or in the activities taking place within the research networks of ESREA.

Based on the above arguments, it is possible to conclude that the epistemological debate is no longer as big an issue as previously was the case. At the same time, when focusing on adult education and learning research today we can see how it is diverse and draws inspiration from quite different disciplines (forms of knowledge) and fields of knowledge.

Approaches to research and scholarship

As contribution to a discussion of the state of the field we have looked at the articles published in four international adult education journals publishing in the English language; identifying the theoretical traditions or theorizations drawn on in 2011 for research and scholarship within these publications. Looking at what is published in these four journals does, we suggest, offer a starting point for discussion of the far wider and more complex profusion of research and scholarship going on and published or otherwise elsewhere; lying within the covers of research reports or scholarly texts. Looking at these articles might be said then to be illuminating in that they provide a flavor of what goes on in these specific sites. What these journal publications illuminate must though be taken with caution, as through the English language approaches perhaps achieve a peculiar prominence and propensity for mobilization, as if representational of what is going on, and in this achieve a higher profile than they might otherwise have.

The four journals selected for analysis of the approaches taken to research and scholarship have been *Adult Education Quarterly* (AEQ - USA), the *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* (RELA - Europe), *Studies in Continuing Education* (SCE - Australia) and *Studies in the Education of Adults* (SEA - UK). All articles published in the 2011 volume of these journals were analysed and characterized in terms of the theory/approaches mobilised and what these 'did' (a total of 67 articles were reviewed with the following distribution: AEQ: 19; RELA: 12; SCE: 21; SEA: 15). Qualitative studies dominate these 2011 publications, and there are three theoretical approaches used in a more substantial way than others (altogether half of the articles): critical pedagogy, post-structuralist theorisations and socio-cultural and situated perspectives on learning.

Critical pedagogy appears an important theoretical terrain for researchers engaged in adult education and learning research in these journals. The uptake of poststructuralist perspectives is strong. This latter seems to be in concordance with the argument by Fejes (2008) where 9% of the articles in these four journals over a seven year period referred to Foucault. The strength in the number of socio-cultural and

situated perspectives within these publications could maybe partly be explained by a trend towards such perspectives in education more generally.

One could probably argue that the above three theoretical traditions are also quite common in educational research more widely if we would analyse other journals from the same geographical locations and with the same language (although this is an empirical question). However, among the other articles published in the 2011 issue, there is also a representation of two theoretical traditions with a specific relation to the field of adult education research. Transformative learning theory grew out of the field in North America, while biographical research have become important to adult education researchers' in having developed this approach in the field as their own; drawing on strong traditions from sociology (since the 1930s and revived in the late 1960s in the work of Bertaux), history and literature. Both transformative learning and biographical research are represented in the 2011 volume of the journals, but not as extensively as one might expect, given that they are argued in many places to be commonly adopted in research (cf. Taylor & Cranton, 2013; West, Alheit, Siig Andersen & Merrill, 2007).

Analysis

In the analysis of the four journals, critical pedagogy is the most common theoretical terrain referred to (15 articles). Here authors draw on critical feminism, community learning, social movement learning and post-colonial perspectives. The problem with identifying approaches through numbers (not even statistical indicators, for the numbers are not sufficiently large), is they appear to say something about a research community even though they cannot be taken to imply this in any straight forward way. What inference is possible from this emphasis? Perhaps it is suffice to say that from this data critical pedagogy approaches continue to be strongly used, and supported by peer reviewers as 'within the true' of the work of the field; implicating continuing support in the addressing of specific social claims and issues of social injustice and inequity. This where critical pedagogy

> regards specific claims… as parts of systems of belief and action that have aggregate effects within power structures of society. It asks about these systems of belief and action, who *benefits*? The primary preoccupation of critical pedagogy is with social injustice and how to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations. (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 47)

Among the articles categorised there are a wide range of objectives; such as a focus on 'how well organizations are able to make use of this [ICT] technology to further their goals of promoting social movement learning and activism' (Irving & English, 2011, p. 262), or for Holst (2011, p. 117) one of the aims is to 'elaborate what I consider to be the major challenges which new forms of social movement organising pose for adult education research interested in advancing social justice'. Grayson (2011, p. 197) 'sheds light on the interrelationships between organising and educating, and the importance of re-historicising and politicising social movement theories' and Zielinska, Kowzan and Prusinowska (2011, p. 251) focus on describing a social movement that started at a university in Poland aiming at 'democratising the university and implementing various changes concerning space management and decision-making processes both within the academia and in terms of future education in general'. The dominance of varied approaches that take up such themes, implicates the continuing support for such aims and motivations by English language speaking authors and reviewers.

In this issue of RELA, one article is positioned in this critical pedagogy domain. Liam Kane from Scotland compares popular education in Europe and Latin America.

He argues that both have something to learn from each other in terms of the relationships between popular education and the state. On the one hand, popular education as it emerged in Latin America could fill a gap that the educational system did not cover, i.e. basic education, while in Europe education has most often been understood as equivalent to state education. Europe could, Kane argues, learn from the independent popular education initiatives from Latin America. In Europe the relationship to the state and state funding might limit the possibilities for social action. On the other hand, 'familiarity with the European experience of widespread state-run education may help alert Latin Americans to both the pitfalls and opportunities in trying to engage in popular education within state structures.' (Kane, 2013, p. 92).

Poststructuralist theorisations were the second most common approach in the journals analysed (12 articles). Although it is also possible to speak about these as critical theorisations, they differ from others in that they are anti-essentialist and non-dualist, avoiding any search for essence and causality. Among the articles identified, there were authors drawing on the work of Foucault and Ranciére and those working with actor-network theory. The focus was on how subjectivity is discursively shaped, for example, in how students within a basic adult education program in social and health care, 'are positioned and position themselves in relation to the discourses mobilised in the programme' (Winther Jensen, 2011, p. 107), or in a focus on how workers in elderly care are mobilised through a technology of activation and technique of invitation (Fejes & Nicoll, 2011). Yet others focus otherwise, directing post-structuralist critique towards autobiographical writing used in adult education (Michelson, 2011), or, through actor-network theory, to critique fixed ideas about relationships between learning and work (Mulcahy, 2011). What these analyses do, is to disrupt the taken-for-granted-ness of the present, disrupting our notions of progress, development and enlightenment, and allow different knowledge constellations, discourses and practices to emerge.

In this issue of RELA socio-material conceptualizations for research in adult education and learning - complexity and actor-network - are put forward by Tara Fenwick and Richard Edwards, also from Scotland. They distinguish these approaches from others through their performative ontology. They argue that these help in tracing relationships between the social and material in teaching and learning: 'Thus teaching is not simply about the relationships between humans but is about the networks of humans and things through which teaching and learning are translated and enacted as such. They do not exist and cannot be identified as separate from the networks through which they are themselves enacted.' (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013, p. 54). The authors explore notions of agency and empowerment in adult education, and argue that such theoretical work develops understanding of how specific such accounts become stabilized and what they do.

Three out of the nineteen articles in the 2011 issue of AEQ draw on transformative learning theory, while there are none with this approach in the other three journals. Developed in the North American context, this theory is directed towards interest in how individuals transform their worldview. There are argued (see Mezirow and Associates, 2000) three possible dimensions to such transformation: psychological (changes in understanding of the self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioural (changes in lifestyle). Important in support of such transformation, is that people change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs. Transformative learning theory emerged in the USA through the writing of Jack Mezirow (see e.g. Mezirow and Associates, 2000) in the 70s, and it has had a huge impact in the northern American community of adult education researchers and an institutional emphasis in the annual international transformative learning conference.

The focus of those articles published in 2011 were on understanding 'older adults' (elders) transformative learning through bereavement in late life' (Moon, 2011, p. 22), to discuss how Mezirow's theory would be more useful if it was applied in a more cultural sensitive way (Ntseane, 2011) and deepen the understanding of transformative learning for researchers by analysing their own collaborative research (Swartz & Triscari, 2011). These articles in the main North American journal in the field offer examples of the approach, and indicate perhaps a strong presence in the field in that geographical location.

In this issue of RELA, Edward Taylor and Patricia Cranton from the USA critically discuss the development of transformative learning theory and argue that there is a need for more in-depth thought to avoid redundant and deterministic analyses. The problem, they argue, is that despite that the number of published articles using transformative learning theory has increased substantially over the last 15 years, it is repetitive, and with little theoretical progress. Further, they note a strong North American dominance of its use. They identify five issues in need of further debate to develop theory in this domain: the role of experience, empathy, the theory's inherently positive orientation, the desire to change, and the need for research involving positivist and critical approaches.

Biographical research appears important in the field of adult education research. Although including a wide range of different branches, generally speaking the focus of biographical research is on the individual learner and the 'importance of engaging with the everyday and small scale in building understanding of how the world works, based on social interactionism perspectives' (West et al., 2007, p. 46). If transformative learning has been popular in North America, biographical research has especially become so in Europe; there is a research network on life history and biographical research within ESREA that attracts many participants to its meetings. In the analysis of the 2011 issue of the four journals there are two articles using biographical perspectives for their analysis, both published in RELA. One way of interpreting the dominance of specific approaches might be in their subjective or discursive function within the field in particular discursive locations. Although these two approaches (transformative learning theory and biographical research) may appear distinctively different, and refer to the American and European contexts respectively, it may be that they adopt somewhat similar such functions.

However, the orientations are diverse. In one of these articles, Maier-Gutheil and Hof (2011, p. 75) 'compare individuals' [adult educators] narratives of their professional work at different times in their biographies' in order to understand 'the differences in professional learning through the life course and the influence of institutional and social context in the development of professionalism'. In the second article the focus is on analysing how identity is built in a cross-border area drawing on group interviews and biographical interviews (Gualda et al., 2011). Biographical learning thus provides a way to identify social as well as institutional contexts and interaction, which influence individuals' learning trajectories and identity processes.

In this issue of RELA, Rob Evans from Germany introduces the research interview as a site of learning and knowledge sharing. By employing a detailed discursive-linguistic analysis of a life-story, the author provides a picture of local construction of social action. As Evans argues

> a research interview, embedded in interaction and participant reflexivity, and addressing the learning transitions told in talk, can "tap into" the construction of new knowledge adults acquire (Alheit, 2007) as they break with routines of everyday experience and move on to new biographical spaces in which they can position themselves anew (Evans, 2013, p. 29).

Again with a focus on knowledge, but this time the knowledge of professional adult educators, the last thematic article in this issue is from Armando Loureiro, Artur Cristóvão and Telmo Caria from Portugal. These authors draw on the work of Bernstein to explore how specific adult educators make use of 'official' pedagogical knowledge. The study draws on Bernstein's model of official pedagogical discourse and ethnographic field methods, to focus on the work of a team of specialist educators in a local development association in the north of Portugal where pedagogical work is heavily prescribed by external agents. The study explores the reproduction and recontextualisation of knowledge – exploring the 'room for manoeuvre' (Loureiro, Cristóvão & Caria, 2013, p. 72). of these professionals in reworking the official knowledge of educational programmes, so as to better align with their understanding of the needs and expectations of students.

End note

In this editorial we indicated our thoughts on the need for histories of approaches to research in the field, and in our own partial and fragmentary fashion, began to explore ways in which the field has been conceived and something of past and current approaches. Our hope has been that through this and the contributions of the issue a space might be opened for further discussion and debate.

Note

[1] France, Holland and Yugoslavia are specifically mentioned by Davenport (1987), in Holmes and Abington-Cooper (2000).

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