

Thematic issue of RELA:**Sustainability: Place, Space and Pedagogy in Adult Learning and Education**

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The challenge of sustainability: Policy goals encounter existential questions

We face enormous and unprecedented ecological and social challenges globally. While there is a widely shared agreement that there is “no time to waste” (Wildemeersch, Håkansson & Læssøe, 2023) to find much more sustainable modes of development and living, a policy-driven agreement on this need can be dated back to at least the *Limits of Growth* report from 1972 for the Club of Rome (Meadows et al., 1972). However, under the leitmotif of sustainability, this 50 years’ evolution of earth and humankind have claimed for ever greater urgency in recent years and, in 2015, the global community adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCO, 2014). This call was the result of a growing global alarm at the pace of socio-ecological degeneration, most notably but not solely the climate crisis, as well as the distinct but connected problems of inequality and social injustice – also in terms of who is generating respectively suffering from the impacts of socio-ecological degeneration. Meeting these policy goals and targets and the wider civilizational challenge of creating sustainable societies in the medium term are the pressing tasks of the age. This is necessarily an educational matter. The articulation of the 2015 SDGs was followed by the Incheon declaration at the World Education Forum. Accordingly, UNESCO’s (2019) target 4.7 of SDG 4 states: “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)”. The commitment to sustainability, understood through the SDGs, has defined the work of key adult education International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) in recent years and has served as an important catalyst to shift sustainability to the top of also adult education’s agenda.

Research in adult learning and education (ALE) on sustainability

While questions of social justice and equality have been a constitutive aspect of scholarship on ALE, a brief analysis of the international literature on adult education related to environmental and sustainability issues informs us that there is still only “a relatively small, but growing body of work” (Griswold, 2017, p. 9). An important reason for the relatively limited attention for sustainability issues among researchers in adult education is the fact that policies on lifelong learning have in the previous two decades increasingly been defined by the advance of the neo-liberal economic agenda. According to Catherine Casey and Lily Asamoah, “the neo-liberal, human capital-oriented model of lifelong learning has achieved a powerful hold in the field of education and lifelong learning” (2016, p. 593). In a similar way,

Victoria Orlovic Lovren and Katarina Popovic argue that, “both sustainability and lifelong learning serve as terms and conceptions that are turned into general slogans, promoted as policy instruments, typically for the end purpose of enhancing economic competitiveness” (2018, p. 13). They point out that, in spite of the fact that adult education and sustainability issues appear to be natural allies, “it is difficult if not impossible, to discuss what the role of adult education is – and whether it is considered an inherent part of the education goals that will lead to sustainability” (2018, p. 2).

There are two strands of somewhat overlapping work which have tried to address this gap. First of all, there is a body of work, a great deal of it from Canada, that has linked sustainability to transformative learning (see also Košmerl & Mikulec, 2022). Elizabeth Lange and Joy O’Neill (2018) and colleagues have argued that environmental sustainability is necessarily linked to effecting a major shift in cultural assumptions about the relationship between the nature, human and non-human animals. This is often rooted in alternative epistemologies derived from deep ecology, spiritual traditions and environmental activism. The second strand of thought links radical popular education, often aligned with feminism and socialism in various ways, to questions of sustainability (von Kotze & Walters, 2023). Alongside this we can point to the work of researchers that link transformative change to a new ecology of knowledges in education and society (Tandon, Singh, Clover & Hall, 2016). These two strands emphasize, moreover, the role and impact of educators and facilitators as being much more than edu-ecological technicians, rather “participatory contributors” (Lange, 2018, p. 411), and of the learners themselves as being much more than passive recipients of the sustainability agenda, but “agents in constructing a different trajectory of societies” (Barrett, 2016, p. 108). In this holistic and critical view on an education for sustainable development, aiming at enriching “the principles and values of sustainable development in communities, educational institutions and individuals, striving to change the existing human, social and environmental relations and power structures” (Košmerl & Mikulec, 2022, p. 175), the significance of space and place becomes apparent for linking cognitive *and* bodily experiences, knowledges and practices of educators *and* learners embedded in a local, while simultaneously global natural habitat. This offers the potential to overcome instrumental approaches of ESD as a learning technology and outcome production, by aiming, for educators *and* learners, at “becoming a responsible constituent of the environment, rather than just a distant observer” (Wildemeersch, Håkansson & Læssøe, 2023, p. 12; emphasis in original).

Community, space and place in ALE for sustainability

This aligns with the observation that a key idea within adult education has been the focus on community as a site of knowledge and mobilization which links place to struggles in wider social space (Freire, 1970, 1972; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Horton et al., 1990). The emphasis is ‘digging in’ into the knowledge of a given community in order to then move outwards by building links between specific communities and social movements. But do these ideas still serve in meeting the challenges of sustainability? In an accelerated world driven by deeply rooted logic of accumulation our experience of space is often fragmented and place becomes a site of loss, dislocation and nostalgia. We also know that a global orientation (pursuing sustainability on a planetary scale and as a planetary challenge) often leads to

feeling overwhelmed, ineffective or hopeless (“we can't do anything - the problems are too vast, the forces arrayed against sustainability are too strong”). In the face of these challenges It seems to us that in ALE we need more developed theoretical tools for grasping how space is currently produced (Lefebvre, 1991; Löw, 2016) and how this relates to various forms of agency (Scott, 2005).

With this special issue we are especially interested in bottom-up practices that arise in concrete places. Such practices pose their ‘own’ issues of sustainability, and allow the inhabitants of these places to take care of these concrete places and things that are present in those places (such as a shoreline, a brownfield, a park, etc.). Secondly, a growing number of researchers points at the specific abilities that people (re)acquire in these practices. The responses that emerge in these place-based practices are neither instrumental (with a focus on the question ‘how to fix this problem’) nor simply emancipatory in the traditional sense (with a focus on the question: Who am I, and who do I need to be(come)?). Instead, they propel humans into an attentive care for the many relationships and dependencies (social, material, spatial) in that place. Education in these place-engaged practices points then to the triple capacity of becoming sensitive to the heterogeneity of human and non-human entanglements, of becoming able to slow down one’s habits of orientation and of engaging oneself to formulate propositions about what living in these places need in order to thrive and prosper (Decuyper, Hoet, & Vandenabeele, 2019). This care and attention do not stop only with one’s own place but also encourage a broader concern for the world. As Cameron (2003, p. 193) puts it, “experiencing a deeper relationship with one place opens one up to a deeper affiliation with all places, rather than an exclusive sense of place”.

So, important work needs to be done, both theoretically and empirically, if adult education research and adult education practices want to play a significant role in a pedagogy that aims to learn to re-inhabiting the places where we live and to compose a response to the question what these situated worlds need in order to thrive and prosper (Gruenewald, 1999). Milana, Rasmussen and Holford (2016) refer among others to Seghezze (2009) who searches for linking sustainability to issues of social justice and alternative notions of time, space and territory. This, we think, entails acknowledging the complexity of the production of space on various levels (Lefebvre, 1991; Löw, 2016) across a global system and how this relates to sustainability without solely focusing on the systemic and global. At the same time, we are interested in rethinking community and place. As Massey (1991, p. 24), “Is it not possible for a sense of place to be progressive; not self-closing and defensive, but outward-looking?” In this special issue we want to explore how this progressive reenvisioning of place relates to ecology. Latour (2018) calls for a recognition of the grounded, territorialized reality of our existence on earth. For Latour we are experiencing a shift from a society in which the collective ‘we’ was based on the importance of modernization and emancipation to a society in which explication and attachments become crucial. As Latour writes: “as we moved on, through our technologies, through our scientific inquiries, through the extension of our global empires, we rendered more and more explicit the fragility of the life support systems that make our ‘spheres of existence’ possible” (Latour, 2004, p. 3). One can point to large scale collective efforts to do this in the Zapatista communities in Chiapas (Maison, 2023) but we are equally interested in how this plays out in less visible and smaller scale ways.

We invite scholars to elaborate on one or more of the following topics and questions and in doing so discuss the outspoken educational dynamic of these initiatives:

- How well do established conceptions of community, space and place in ALE serve us in meeting the challenge of sustainability?
- What methodologies are appropriate for research dealing with the complexity of space and place for ESD?
- How does this place-engaged pedagogy intensify the experience that something is at stake in inhabiting the world in the here-and-now (rather than in a globally projected future) and make a particular response to sustainability challenges in local communities possible?
- How in these practices specific abilities of for example noticing, corresponding, regenerating, commoning, valuing, imagining etc., become possible and how this differs from the abilities that are fostered and valued in adult education that is driven by a neo-liberal economic agenda?
- What kind of educational activities can foster the sensitivity to the human and non-human entanglements in particular places or how can we understand the educational dynamic in which adults learn to think in the presence of these entanglements?
- Focusing on the emergence of new possibilities of place-engaged pedagogies in adult education, what is the role of the adult educator or practitioner operating within these practices?
- How does attention to place and sustainable development modify and enrich the meaning of emancipation?
- What can researchers in ALE learn from work in social geography, anthropology and ecology on space and place?

We welcome contributions that elaborate extensively on one particular case, in the broad range of formal and nonformal adult learning and education and in very different places (urban, rural, (non)Western). We equally welcome more theory-driven reflections on how such place-based pedagogies have the potential to reconfigure humanist conceptualizations of time, space and more-than-human collectives under the leitmotif of sustainability.

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