

## Adult education as a means of democratization

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## Adult Education as a Means of Democratization

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Recent international trends in Adult Education (AE) mirror the diverse realities this field is experiencing around the world. This article discusses the trend towards democratization through a revision of existing knowledge in three main domains: theory, research, and practice. First, a theoretical framework of democratization as applied in AE will be outlined. Second, recent research developments will be reviewed as they inform the process of democratization through Adult Education which is occurring in different contexts. Third, an analysis of a specific process of democratization in the AE practice will be carried out, based on the situation in Spain.

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## **Adult Education as a Means of Democratization**

*Recent international trends in Adult Education (AE) mirror the diverse realities this field is experiencing around the world. This article discusses the trend towards democratization through a revision of existing knowledge in three main domains: theory, research, and practice. First, a theoretical framework of democratization as applied in AE will be outlined. Second, recent research developments will be reviewed as they inform the process of democratization through Adult Education which is occurring in different contexts. Third, an analysis of a specific process of democratization in the AE practice will be carried out, based on the situation in Spain.*

### **1. Introduction**

There are diverse trends in Adult and Continuing Education throughout Europe. These respond in different ways to the challenges which arise due to globalization and individualization processes, and have different approaches to the implementation of adult and lifelong learning policies. This is also connected to the increasing importance of knowledge, and to changes in the structure of knowledge in today's societies, which emphasize the need to govern knowledge acquisition processes (Arnold et al. 2000). As Arnold and colleagues stress in "Research Memorandum on Adult and Continuing Education" (2000), in spite of opportunities to acquire knowledge being promoted by equal opportunities statements, there is also a risk of new inequalities arising.

In addition, according to their particular contexts, each country has its own specific priorities with regard to the development of AE. Some European countries focus their attention mainly on promoting the acquisition of work skills for adult learners. Others prioritize the importance of improving the development of professional Adult Education as a way of improving the present and future situation in the field. Amongst these trends, a tendency towards democratization in AE can also be identified.

At the 5<sup>th</sup> CONFITEA (International Conference in Adult Education) in Hamburg (1997), Adult Education was already defined as a way to promote democracy and to extend full participation of citizens in our societies. In addition, many authors argue that Adult Education has strong potential to transform societies (Freire 1970, Brookfield 2005a, Brookfield 2005b, Lindeman 1987, Cunningham 2000).

In Europe, but also in other regions of the world, the link between Adult Education and different ways of extending social and political participation in local communities, into society as a whole and into the field of Adult Education itself, has taken on different

forms. Therefore, this article provides evidence taken from theory and research, but also from practice, which demonstrates that AE can be an additional means of democratizing communities and, that, in some cases too, it is challenging its own basis by extending democratic AE practices, as the Spanish case illustrates here.

## **2. Theoretical contributions to democratization in AE**

The role of education for democracy has been subject to reflection by several authors at different times. John Dewey (1966), for example, became an important international reference in different disciplines as he clearly contributed to defining the role of education in encouraging social change and in understanding how education could lead to the improvement of democratic life in societies. He considered that the way to create education for democracy was by promoting democratic education:

A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustments of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder (Dewey 1966, p. 99).

In the field of Adult Education specifically, other authors have theorized, particularly in relation to the role of AE in the democratization of societies. Eduard Lindeman (1987), for example, stressed, as early as 1944, that Adult Education should be prepared, amongst other things, to “reveal to people the nature of those democratic disciplines which describe the thought and conduct of persons living within a culture which is by affirmation and aspiration democratic” (Lindeman 1987, p. 158–159). In addition, Lindeman also considered Adult Education to be an instrument of social change, which should be oriented towards synchronizing democratic and learning processes.

Paulo Freire wrote extensively about education’s commitment to social transformation and about the popular movement’s struggle for emancipation through egalitarian, dialogic and democratic education (Freire 1970). He identified the consequences of banking education on adult learning. According to Freire, banking education involves learners being treated as passive recipients, as objects instead of subjects of learning, and educators being considered as the sole dispensers of knowledge. In contrast, Freire made very significant contributions to the dialogical character of democratic adult learning, in which educators also learn from the learners and support them to become active participants in their own learning processes and in society:

The important thing, from the point of view of libertarian education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades. Because this view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically with the people, it serves to introduce the pedagogy of the oppressed, in the elaboration of which the oppressed must participate (Freire 1970, p. 105).

More recently, the dialogic character of AE has been analysed by Brookfield (2005a; 2005b), who carried out an analysis of the central role awarded to adult learning in Jürgen Habermas' theories. Based on his interpretations of Habermas' theory of communicative action, Brookfield explains how, due to the dialogic tradition in adult education, adult learners and adult educators can learn to create communicative actions based on validity claims and oriented towards reaching an understanding which supports deliberative and democratic societies. This is a way of trying to avoid conversations oriented towards exploiting or dominating others. He believes that democratic societies need to organize themselves in order to create mechanisms to enhance the freest forms of communication. According to Brookfield, this is the adult learning challenge in the contemporary era (Brookfield 2005b).

Indeed, Brookfield affirms that learning democracy is related to adult learning projects as it involves learning how to apply deliberative decision-making processes to different areas of our lives, and how to resolve contradictions and tensions in democratic societies. In this context, Habermas (1992) describes the rules of a discourse which is based on communicative reason and which provides the basis for democratic processes. These rules are focused on ensuring that all relevant voices are heard, that the best arguments provided are accepted and that only the non-coercive coercion of better arguments is what sustains the affirmations and negations of the participants (cf. Habermas 1992, pp. 260 s.s.). Following these rules can contribute to guaranteeing the legitimacy of decision-making in democratic societies, and this can be learnt through adult political learning (Brookfield 2005a; 2005b).

Along similar lines, Welton (2002) stresses the significance that learning has for political listening in AE, as this is a pedagogical practice of democratic citizenship. Indeed, this author highlights the importance of learning to listen in order to combat anti-listening forces in our societies and their effects which lead to the erosion of solidarity. Specifically, he argues in favour of the role that adult education can have in creating the conditions which enable women and men to speak and listen freely in public: "Commitment to educating the communicatively competent citizen has deep roots in adult education traditions" (Welton 2002, pp. 207). At the same time, Welton stresses the way in which adult educators can support communicative infrastructures in institutions and organizations to promote public debates. Finally, he also points out opportunities for adult educators to create innovative learning processes in which adults can develop characteristics related to the development of democracies. These include self-reflection, moral commitment, resolving discrepancies due to differences of opinion in a respectful way, and being open to the possibility of changing one's mind. Great importance is thus placed on making efforts to learn to listen and to speak in AE in order to construct democratic civil societies, both individually and collectively.

The need to stress the collective dimension of critical adult education and its practice through social movements in civil society is also pointed out by Phyllis M. Cunningham

(2000). She highlights the need to promote democratization amongst adult educators, creating a concept of education which is more related to communitarian processes and goals.

Finally, developments in “dialogic learning” (Flecha 2000) have also provided the foundation for an exhaustive analysis of the characteristics of adult education based on dialogic procedures. Flecha looks at the way this approach to adult education is contributing to increasing democratic practices in AE and in society. Through the development of principles such as “egalitarian dialogue” or the “equality of differences”, for example, Flecha has elaborated on already existing practices in the field of AE. In these practices adult learners and educators organize their daily activities guaranteeing that all voices, especially the voices of the traditionally voiceless, are listened to and considered relevant in democratic decision-making bodies. In addition, social and cultural differences are managed in such a way that inequalities among people belonging to diverse social and cultural groups are not strengthened, but instead, are gradually overcome.

### **3. International research developments in the field**

This tradition, within the Adult Education field, of enhancing the conditions for the democratization of societies, is also addressed by authors who analyse AE experiences implemented in different countries. Merrill (2003), for example, focuses attention on examples of active citizenship carried out in Catalonia, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Slovenia and Scandinavian countries, in order to demonstrate the differences between different models for the promotion of active citizenship and for reaching greater levels of democratization in societies. In Catalonia and in Northern Ireland, community-based learning is a feature in transforming people’s lives and tackling social, political and economic inequalities, while in Scandinavian countries and in Slovenia, activities such as study circles are also a form of learning democracy helping adults decide upon learning materials.

Specifically, the impact of study circles or public forums is also analysed by Gastil (2004) through two field studies involving deliberative forums. Gastil stresses the way the democratic character of societies can be promoted through deliberative civic education. He argues that “in civic educational contexts, participants can strengthen their political beliefs and develop democratic conversation habits” (Gastil 2004, pp. 311). This study focused on the National Issue Forums (NIF) in the US, where the research participants were learners from adult basic literacy courses and other learning programmes. Gastil states that adult participation in civic education can promote political deliberative conversations and strengthen speaker networks. These types of deliberative educational practices can hence facilitate the involvement of adult learners in democratic discussions, although some of the results also indicate scepticism regarding the effectiveness of some groups which are based on political discussion and action.

Subsequently, Gastil affirms that the effectiveness of these deliberative forums can vary according to the quality of the adult education programmes being implemented. So, deliberative civic education does have the potential to change the democratic involvement of adult learners, but its success cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, its success depends on the way in which these forums are conducted and experienced by adult learners.

Amongst other experiences, Merrifield (2003) analysed some initiatives carried out in Scotland. She reflected on the levels of engagement and active participation of adult learners in Adult Education. Even though there are still only limited real opportunities for many adult learners to be fully involved in the negotiation of course content, in their evaluation or in consultation processes about which courses should be offered, some relevant experiences of democratization within AE are mentioned. One of these experiences is a Learners' Forum located in Edinburgh, called ALFIE (Adult Learners' Forum in Edinburgh), which is a voluntary organization run by adult learners who take part in community-based groups to share ideas and experiences, and to express their collective views to decision-making bodies. Learners' Forums in Wales, which also emerged in 2001 in order to promote the voices of learners in discussions with professionals and decision-makers, are also discussed.

In addition, Merrifield indicates the way NALA (The National Adult Literacy Agency) in Ireland is fostering learner's voices. Indeed, NALA has designed a quality framework to be used for literacy schemes as a tool to monitor the development of practices to define methods for improvement. The quality framework ensures the involvement of different stakeholders (tutors, managers, volunteers, learners etc.) in these processes, as this is considered to be a basic element in the creation of democratic education environments.

In Portugal, research findings indicate that, in recent years, the country's tradition of popular associations promoting democracy and active citizenship has undergone changes (Guimarães/Sancho 2005). Guimarães and Sancho reflect on the results of the PIAE (Popular Initiated Adult Education) research project (1997–2002) which was funded by the EU Socrates Programme and run by the University of Minho's Unit for Adult Education. The University of Linköping (Sweden) and the University of Cork (Ireland) also participated in this project. Based on its findings, some risks were identified which are associated with a trend observed in the country: an increase in the predominance of more pragmatic and market-oriented approaches. However, due to the fact that popular associations are developing important forms of welfare provisions not offered by the state, Guimarães and Sancho highlight the need to increase efforts to create radical forms of popular and adult education which can promote democratic practices (cf. Guimarães/Sancho 2005, pp. 59 s.s.).

The impact that AE can have on the democratization of societies has also been analysed in other regions of the world. Steven E. Finkel (2002), for example, examines

the effects of adult civic education programmes on political participation in the Dominican Republic and South Africa. Through survey data collected from participants in different civic education programmes and control group respondents, findings show significant results in four of the seven civic education programmes analysed. He found that the effects of democratic training and civic education on local-level participation depend on several variables: the frequency and nature of civic education “treatment”, the extent to which the programme focuses on participation or other democratic orientations, the participatory teaching methodologies implemented, as well as the individual’s store of prior political and participatory resources.

That is, we expect to find greater effects when individuals receive more frequent exposure to the mobilizing messages of civic education; when those messages are taught through more intensive, involving participatory methodologies; and when the individual has sufficient political resources to act on the messages received through civic education training (Finkel 2002, p. 1012).

These contributions demonstrate that there are difficulties with regard to extending democratic procedures within the field of AE or increasing their effects on wider society. However, they also show that efforts are being carried out worldwide, demonstrating the existence of a trend to address these issues. Indeed, based on scientific literature and research, a tendency can clearly be identified which is mainly oriented towards overcoming inequalities within decision-making processes in AE. This tendency also specifies the way in which more democratic forms of participation can be implemented in this field, becoming a real option for those who have been traditionally excluded.

In the next section, the Spanish case will be analysed to show how these aspects can be found in concrete AE practices. The case provides specific examples of how these forms of democratic participation in AE are promoted in a particular context and how they are achieving greater inclusion for those adult learners whose voices have hitherto remained unheard.

#### **4. Trends towards democratization in AE practice: the case of Spain**

In the following section I will focus on recent developments in democratization that occurred in the field of AE practice in Spain. Several facts and events, worthy of mention, have had an important impact on the progression of this trend.

##### **The precedent set by La Verneda-Sant Martí School of Adults**

This adult education school was founded in 1978 by local people from La Verneda, then a working-class area in the city of Barcelona, and is a point of reference in terms of democratic popular education in Spain (Puigvert/Valls 2005). As Sánchez-Aroca (1999) points out, the exceptional characteristic of the school is the level of involvement of adult learners in all of its structures, and in the democratic processes carried out in all of its spaces: from the class-room situation (e.g. taking into account the adult learners’



interests in decision-making processes with regard to scheduling or deciding on the content of teaching) to the development of didactic materials. This implies the definition of decision-making structures in which teachers, students, volunteers and members of the community are involved through egalitarian dialogue, in which everything is discussed and decided collectively, without hierarchies in the school's structures. This means that adult learners ("participants") are able to take part in decision-making at all levels of school organization.

This dialogic way of functioning is also manifested in two learner's associations, *Ágora* and *Heura*, for the participants in the school. These associations, along with the various decision-making bodies and assemblies on a weekly or monthly basis, allow decisions to be made collectively and are the mechanisms which contribute towards guaranteeing the democratic nature of this internationally recognized AE practice.

### **The Participants Bill of Rights (FACEPA 1999)**

The Participants Bill of Rights in Adult Education (FACEPA 1999) is one result of the popular education movement which has been working to democratize AE practice in Spain and, also, at an international level. The Bill was elaborated by several forums involving adult education participants, in which, through dialogue and discussions, the basic rights for participants in AE which it contains were agreed upon. A preliminary draft circulated throughout Spain, and later on, the same procedure was carried out with participants from other European countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Hungary (Puigvert/Valls 2005). This Bill has no statutory effects, but it has been used as a framework to request more commitment to recognizing the rights of participants in AE from organizations and governments.

Significantly, other countries have also carried out similar initiatives. Merrifield (2003) reports experiences in Scotland and the US, for example, where several Bills of Rights for Adult Learners have been agreed upon. These were, in many cases, defined according to the opinions of the adult learners' themselves, based on the need to ensure the rights of all adults who wish to learn in any setting. These experiences involve recognition of the learner's rights to be involved in designing and planning educational programmes, and in decision-making processes. In this sense they can be considered significant elements in helping to move towards societies aiming for more democracy.

### **The DAE movement**

Although for many years, many adult learners' associations in Spain have been working to achieve democratic quality education and full participation in society, the Democratic Adult Education (DAE) movement which emerged in 2000 marked a shift in this area. The Confederation of Federations and Associations of Participants in Democratic Adult Education and Culture (CONFAPEA), which consists of different associations and organizations for adult learners who manage themselves, organized the 1<sup>st</sup> Tri-Confer-

ence for Democratic Adult Education in Barcelona that year. During the three-day event researchers, adult educators, and adult learners discussed how to democratize research on and the practice of AE. Since then, this event has been held every three years as a state-wide forum in which all parties are involved in the discussion on an equal basis. After the 1<sup>st</sup> Tri-Conference, an Ethical Code of Democratic Adult Education was drawn up and agreed upon by all the participants. This forms the basis on which collaboration between researchers, educators, and participants is constructed, guaranteeing that the interests and needs of the latter constantly occupy a predominant position (Puigvert/Valls 2005).

CONFAPEA works with the support of the REDA (Network for Democratic Adult Education), which consists of adult educators and the Spanish Network of University Professors and Researchers in Adult Education (Group 90), which includes professors from universities which support this social movement. As Puigvert and Valls stress (2005), CONFAPEA promotes ways to guarantee that participants in adult education can decide what kind of education they want for themselves. One of the most significant characteristics of this movement and of all the activities that it organizes is, in particular, the central role of participants who do not hold previous educational qualifications and would thus normally be at a higher risk of facing social and educational inequalities.

In order to ensure the maintenance of this central role, the participants organize different events in which they reflect on AE practice and its democratization: the Annual Adult Learner's Conference, Dialogic Literary Circles, Summer Schools and so forth. "This organisation has been central to the development of the democratic adult education movement in Spain, a platform for collaboration among participants, educators and university teachers and researchers" (Puigvert/Valls 2005, p. 92).

Indeed, the DAE movement is based specifically on the predominant position of those participants who do not yet hold a university degree, and on collaboration between them and adult educators and researchers. The three groups work together to improve and democratize AE, and to give a voice to those who had been voiceless in the field, particularly in decision-making processes. This way of organizing the movement achieves high levels of success as regards designing the means for these participants to lead the whole movement and guide the future of adult education.

## **5. Conclusions**

This article has provided evidence of a trend towards democratization in the field of AE. Theories, research and practice demonstrate this trend, which is evident in more than one country. In addition, several authors have indicated obstacles arising from the difficulties associated with efforts oriented towards increasing democratic practices in AE and in societies in general.

Indeed, current international contexts are also affected by a number of tendencies which are moving in opposite directions to those which aim to address the problems of social exclusion or inequalities, and to democratize decision-making bodies in the field of AE. However, in spite of these difficulties, initiatives towards democratization in the field of AE either exist or are currently emerging worldwide. Some of the contributions analysed here clearly focus attention on the need to promote and improve the dialogic procedures used in the field, in order to guarantee real egalitarian participation for the speakers. Actually, further analysis of which dialogic procedures really do contribute towards promoting democracy in AE practice is needed. This would serve to complement scientific contributions which have already demonstrated the significance that the procedures and methodologies used so far have, with regards to achieving democratic AE practices.

At the same time, the impact which adult education practices can have on deliberative and democratic structures as well as on social transformation is highlighted, confirming the significance AE could achieve in democratic societies. In this sense, the importance of popular movements linked to AE has been pointed out, as they are crucial with regard to defining processes of democratization and emancipation.

The Spanish case provides a specific example of this, one which is set in a particular context but which illustrates the emergence of and the strength acquired by a participant's movement (adult learners). This movement is organized by people who face great educational and social inequalities. Yet, in spite of the difficulties which exist in society when developing these types of movements, these same people are at the forefront of the democratization of AE practices in their own contexts and by extension, they are thus promoting an improvement in the democracy being developed in their communities.

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### **Links**

- Adult Learners' Forum in Edinburg (ALFIE): [www.alfieforum.edin.org/](http://www.alfieforum.edin.org/) (accessed: 22.04.2008)
- Confederation of Federations and Associations of Participants in Democratic Adult Education and Culture (CONFAPEA): [www.neskes.net/confapea/ANG/indexeng.htm](http://www.neskes.net/confapea/ANG/indexeng.htm) (accessed: 22.04.2008)
- The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning: [www.unesco.org/education/uie/confintea/declaeng.htm](http://www.unesco.org/education/uie/confintea/declaeng.htm) (accessed: 22.04.2008)