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Reflections on Creating Democratic Dialogue between Academic Researchers During a Pandemic

This article reports and reflects on some recent activity of the ESREA international research network on active democratic citizenship and adult learning (ADCAL).

Our Network

Next year marks the thirtieth anniversary of European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) and the Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning (ADCAL) network has been part of ESREA from the very beginning. In the 1990s Europe was transformed through seismic events in Eastern Europe and through an ongoing process of integration in the EU and the network's questions and foci reflected this. ADCAL has gone through several iterations and orientations since then and is currently particularly interested in adult learning in social movements; civic education for adults; the social and political construction of citizenship in relation to various discourses on adult learning and education and the historical and contemporary role of popular education.

Form and Content in Adult Education Research

Within adult education as a whole there is a strong and abiding interest in questions of democracy and in particular in democratic pedagogies, democratizing educational institutions and democratic forms of research (Grummell & Finnegan, 2020). Democratizing knowledge certainly underpins some of the most influential accounts of adult education theory and practice (Brookfield, 2005; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; Horton, 2003; Lindemann, 1926; Mezirow, 1991; Williams, 1962).

It seems quite obvious to us that a network which focuses on democracy and adult learning should seek some coherence between means and ends in its work. As a result, we have given, and continue to give, careful consideration to how we share, build, refine and disseminate knowledge. Over the past four years in our discussions with each other as convenors in preparing conferences and seminars and in interactions with network participants we have tried to keep this at the front of our mind by returning to several key questions. How can we ensure that our events are genuinely participatory, dialogical and convivial? How do we avoid the all too familiar reifications and deadening performance routines of the Academy while still ensuring there is robust scholarly debate and discussion? How can we encourage ourselves and others to present in various ways — through text, speech, film and even movement—and to think carefully about the dialectical relationship between form and content in research? How do we create space for meaningful, open exchange between experienced and new, sometimes tentative, researchers? And ultimately how do we ensure that we tap into the ‘good sense’ of adult education practice as an academic adult education research network?

There’s no single right answer to these questions. They require sustained, ongoing attention. For us, as for John Dewey (1966), democracy at every level involves participation, critical reflection and experimentation and this is the attitude we have brought to our events. Sometimes we have succeeded in making sessions and discussion critical, participatory and experimental and at other times we have failed. However, we find fallibility to be an integral element of a struggle to create and maintain dialogical spaces. We embraced the notion of *potentiality* given by Rogoff (2008) in her seminal text on the *educational turn*. Knowledge and skills are not perceived as a precondition for acting, but rather an action is an expression of will and a drive to create, which generates new knowledge. Skills emerge and disappear in an act of creation. Anyhow, these insights originated within the practice are not prescriptions on how to establish democratic exchange because guidelines would diminish a possibility for an experiment. It is a somewhat paradoxical situation. Engaging in democratic dialogues is always a process

embedded in given conditions and beyond striving to be successful as the meaning of success is always related to the already established norms of how things are done. “Education can release our energies from what needs to be to what can be imagined” (Rogoff, 2008). We tried to restore the imaginary power of education which inevitably leads to a failure. What does it mean to fail? What are the indicators of a failure? It is not a wrong way of doing something until we find the right one. Success implies the notions of efficiency and efficacy that are part of the narratives of capitalism. Our subjectivities are formed around the idea of doing things in the right way. Involvement in the experiment assumes readiness to be wrong and to fail against the existing standards. The participation in an experiment can evoke a feeling of wasting time as it defies the efficiency imperative.

We remain convinced that it is possible and valuable to find and create formats for scholarly exchange which are commensurable with the tradition and values of democratic adult education.

Events in a Time of Pandemic

Working to respond to these questions became both trickier and more important during the pandemic. It was, and still is, a very complex time, and we want to be careful about making unwarranted generalizations about living with Covid 19. For us conveners, we can say that we found the difficulties and anxieties of everyday life during the pandemic intensified by being cut away from our communities of scholarly discussion and exchange. Amongst other events, the 2021 Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning biannual conference to be held in Maynooth was postponed. At the same time, we were thrown into meeting and teaching digitally with uneven success and quite a lot of dissatisfaction and disappointments. We found that online academic events were often tiring, frequently dissatisfying and sometimes alienating. Part of this was due to missing what cannot be replaced—the subtlety and joy of embodied encounters—when we meet using virtual platforms. Part of this, we think, was also due to academic events trying to use familiar formats in radically different circumstances. We felt we needed to connect and discuss in our network during the time of pandemic, but to experiment and adapt the schedule and format in the light of our experiences.

These two aspects together—the desire to experiment with democratic approaches to scholarly exchange and our specific experiences of the conditions created by the pandemic and the political responses to it — led us to invite people to participate in a series of research dialogues. We designed these dialogues in a way that the agenda responded to expressed interests of participants, that the

dialogues were small-scale and required some commitment. We asked the participants to commit to all three dialogues of three hours each over three months as we went from late winter into spring. The idea was for people to really be able to get to know each other. Apart from this all that was requested was an expression of interest related to the call-in advance of the dialogues.

Dialogues on Hope from Winter into Spring

Specifically, we invited interested researchers to participate in a series of virtual discussions on ‘The pulse of freedom: Learning from experiments in democracy’. We asked where currently and historically we can discern ‘the pulse of freedom’ and living democracy.

The focus on resources of hope and active experimentation was also part of our response to the circumstances we found ourselves in during the pandemic, even the sense of powerlessness we felt in this period. Of course, the pandemic had also been preceded by a tumultuous, and in many respects worrying, set of political developments. We live in a period of deep inequality and polycrisis (political, economic, social, cultural)—that is to say multiple interlinked crises (Douzinas, 2013)—in which the damage and threats to human life and the environment is all too evident and worsening rapidly. We are witnessing the cumulative impact of the neoliberalisation of society including the degradation and erosion of well-established forms of democratic adult education (Bowl, 2014; Fraser, 2017). The same tendencies influence research and academia, including the research on adult education, as we have seen a spectacular growth of far-right, nativist, populist and even fascist ideas in, for example, Europe, North America and India.

These are in many respects dark times. In inviting researchers to discussions on democratic experimentation and ‘real utopias’, we certainly did not want to deny or minimize these challenges. They constitute the necessary background and, to an extent, the boundaries of any experiments in living democracy and education for freedom. But it seems to us that often the response to these ‘wicked’ problems in social science has been to engage in dismal lament for the state of things and/or apolitical redescription of the sheer complexity of these problems. Following the example of the recently deceased US sociologist Erik Olin Wright (2014), our intention was to spark dialogues that pay close attention to ‘real utopias’, where attempts are being made to democratically and rationally transform practices and institutions ‘in ways that enhance human wellbeing and happiness’ and to explore critically how this is linked to education and learning. Democracy is never completed nor achieved as it is in constant creation and crisis. The pro-

gress happens in leaps, occasionally through experiments and trials that are more or less successful but do not always last. From this perspective, the identity of an active citizen is in constant emergence through those experiments and collective actions. Citizenship education takes place beyond a defined set of competences that prepare people to act and participate in the public sphere. Instead, learning emerges in constant effort to establish spaces of freedom.

In presenting this we were mindful that experiments in democracy exist on multiple scales and temporalities. This involves the politics of contestation and resistance over decades in movements, across regions and within intentional communities. In less explicit ways, experiments in democracy also exist in different types of events, encounters and even moments in everyday life and education (de Certeau, 1984; MAP, 2018). Through the dialogue series, we wanted to draw attention to the large and sustained experiments but also the passing and momentary and the relationship between them.

We invited participants to the dialogues with the following questions, but the participants' response to the call was much richer:

- What pedagogies, research methodologies and institutional initiatives are being used to foster active democratic citizenship (inside and outside formal educational structures)?
- Where and how has democracy been deepened through experiment and reform (inside and outside formal educational structures)?
- In what ways can democracy be developed in the face of polycrisis?

What Happened?

We wanted a small group for these dialogues (we envisaged about 20 people) and in the end there were 16 participants, including the convenors, from 10 countries (Austria, Finland, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Sweden) attending the event. Based on the initial expressions of interest we created a format and some proposals for the group.

Beginning the dialogue series, we focused on introductions of each of the participants. Three things became apparent very quickly. First of all, there was a very real need to connect in the group and a great deal of interest in sharing experiences — both of course inflected by the pandemic. Secondly, the expressions of interest made before the event were somewhat side-lined as people spoke about the interests and experiences in a less formal way. It was fascinating to see how themes which were not named in people's initial communication surfaced and became really alive themes; for example, how events in central and eastern

Europe over the past thirty years impact on how we view democracy and learning. Thirdly, the idea of discussing real utopias was also subtly reframed. It became less sociological and more personal than we had envisaged but hope, and to some extent hopelessness, remained at the heart of the three dialogues but on different and changing terms.

One of the topics that emerged from the participants' proposals was urban space and transformative learning, which we as convenors chose as the general theme for the dialogue of the first session. This was a vast theme and worth mentioning is that the conversation mainly revolved around restrictions and limits to democratic participation in urban life. The exchange on the digital environment as a space for dialogue unfolded, as we shared concerns, excitements, fears and hopes related to participation in virtual, with inspiring examples of creative and rebellious acts of moving a classroom outdoors and experimenting with various innovative methodologies. We all together shared the different realities of our countries and the city emerged as a riven, tightly administered place without too much space for play and freedom. However, the unfinished and unclear places provoked our thinking about new "learningscapes" and collective engagement. Or at least this is how we convenors felt. Of course, this is indicative of the state of things and the particular moment we are in but we very much wanted to make the spring dialogues about what is and might be possible.

For the next session we suggested a theme which we felt was at the heart of our interests: 'Experiments in democratic citizenship and transformative education: Hopeful examples'. After suggestions from several of the participants, we opted for a different approach in organizing the second dialogue. For the session itself we selected four of our group to take responsibility for kicking off with reflections on the dialogue theme for 7 minutes each. After this, we continued to discuss the theme in small groups and ended the session with a shared discussion. The kickstarting contributions sparked very different types of discussions in the small groups, but this was far from linear. In one of the groups, a layered and fascinating conversation about how we might think about emancipatory change and the terms and coordinates we might use. The discussion also led the group to reflect, among other things, on forms of power that don't have to justify or explain themselves—hegemonic power if you wish—and the logic and impact of neoliberalism (which was explained by one group member by sharing on screen image of people locked away from each other which was very evocative). The pattern was different in other small groups. In another we exchanged hopeful examples from different countries in Europe and explored them within the adult education framework. The question of the possibility for activist engagement emerged and we agreed that it was not supported within the mainstream research

agenda. The conversation was rhizomatic in character as the topics were arising from different points of reference and concern. In yet another group, the discussion revolved around questions of transformation and empowerment, flowing from, e.g., aspects of religious faith, to the importance of interpersonal recognition as well as understanding the position of not-knowing.

After the second session, we found it difficult to work out from our post-event discussions what exactly might serve our dialogues best, largely because the texture and content of the three small group discussions appeared to be quite different. However, we reasoned that across the groups and in the general discussion that there was a strong desire for careful thinking on fundamental concepts as a part of these dialogues. As a result, we chose the following guide question for the final session: How can we usefully theorise adult learning for democratic social change in the present period? We also opted to revisit our initial format, where dialogues with the whole group and in small groups were the main form of activity. Interestingly this session revolved largely around the idea, conditions and constraints of dialogue.

We also asked for people to share materials between sessions and this form of sharing and collaboration fastened a sense that this was a collaborative community. It is noteworthy how many of us chose to refer to key figures in adult education history (Freire, Raymond Williams, Myles Horton etc.), creating new meanings of their work in response to current conditions. Possibility in the present, it seems, requires we seek out historical sources of hope. Nonetheless, after the second session, we asked the participants to share texts that are not considered ground-breaking in adult education theory, but to engage with the concepts that were developed at the periphery.

Concluding Remarks

Our interest was to build the event together with the participants and to share responsibility for structure that emerge from one session to the another. We especially wanted to pay attention in particular to welcome early career researchers. Our convenors felt a sense of relief not to be caught in a very instrumental type of communication which marks a great deal of academic discussion and which has become even more common during the pandemic. In this sense some pictures shared of childhood and artistic events and the film pieces were very evocative. It is also remarkable how in virtual communication small things like when one participant suddenly moved to a balcony or when someone read a poem—these human moments impacted and shifted the discussion in small

but significant ways. The role of aesthetic moments was astonishing. There is a fixation of how we do an online exchange, which is characterized by the feeling of absence and disengagement. These actions that disturb the banality did something—they created a human presence in an online environment. It is not about being preoccupied with the usage of different digital tools, but working with the materiality of the participants' spaces, sharing the reality of life as it is. In the post-event evaluation it was evident that the relaxed, warm and creative atmosphere, welcoming and inclusive climate, and generosity of the participants enabled meaningful exchange and space for stories. The dialogues were described as a very humanizing experience which included in depth discussions and learning about adult education. Duration of the event (three months) provided opportunity for sharing of the texts and reflections on relevant theories. We believe that "prolonged" dialogues started to evoke a sense of belonging to a research community which was particularly significant as we all felt a bit alienated from our fellow colleagues.

For us, as convenors, organizing dialogues demanded constant reflection on the process and on our own assumptions on structure of academic events. We had to ask the question that we began with over and over again: How can we ensure that our events are genuinely participatory, dialogical and convivial? At the same time, some of the participants asked for a more structured format and we had to resolve a somewhat paradoxical situation. In order to enable the process of joint creation of knowledge, it is necessary to wonder and wander together. Due to the logic of funding, all research steps must be clearly structured and predictable, which takes us away from meandering and discovery of the unexpected. But what should we do if the participants ask for predictability and input? Do we insist on our vision of education or adjust to the needs of the group?

However, it was also too easy to slip into the usual and well known. The experimentation with a (online) format demands trust in the process that unfolds through time. Sometimes, there is a pressure to be productive by doing the usual, which takes us away from the organic emergence of structure that is immanent to the group. Due to fear that open space can be meaningless to someone and that there is no new content to relate to, we stick to the old and familiar patterns that do not respond well to new situations. From our experience with this dialogue series, this kind of experimentation means trying out new things, but sometimes also returning to the comfort zone, perhaps just to realize it does not work anymore. The meanings of structure can be created and recreated anew, but first, the deconstruction is needed, although it might

create discomfort both among facilitators and participants. Participatory dialogues demand constant negotiations of meanings of process and acceptance of failure which is often condemned in the academic community. But meaningful relations and exchange unfolded when we gave up from the provision and control over content. The content and meanings were developed within the group and they reflected what was relevant for the particular context. As convenors, we felt that during the third session we as a group started the process where people could take shared control over the dialogues—it takes time for people to take control, we became a group in the third session through honesty and comfort.

Our response to these questions was that we as convenors agreed that we try out all together. We strongly felt that as adult education researchers we can create spaces that are not dominated by the traditional paradigm of organizing events. We wanted the dialogue series to be an experimentation in how the rhythm of doing research and creating events could possibly be changed. In that sense, we feel that the dialogue series was a worthwhile, even hopeful, small-scale experiment in democracy.

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ESREA's mission is to support the advancement of high-quality research on the education and learning of adults in Europe by sustaining:

co-operation among researchers, in the European context conceived in the broadest geographical terms;

development of research and dissemination of results in all areas of adult and continuing education;

training of early researchers and continuing professional development of researchers;

relationships with other European organizations and the appropriate national organizations.

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