

Democratic Dialogue and Debate by the Danube: Conference Report from the Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning ESREA Network

The Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning Network held a conference in Belgrade in May of this year. Participants travelled from Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, Italy, Cyprus, and the US. The conference proved both highly stimulating and convivial. As one would expect there were papers and workshops, but there were also meetings and discussions with Serbian activists and artists.

The title of the conference was ‘Movements for democracy, critical learning and the limits of what we know’.

A key focus of the conference was on our learning as researchers, adult educators and as a network community. Wrestling with the profoundly serious challenges to democracy and citizenship of our time – to democracy, citizenship, the environment – multiple presentations seemed to be asking or exploring what we might learn from experienced activists and successful social movements, from failed projects and successful campaigns, from history, policy, and political education programs, and from ordinary citizens pushing back against environmental destruction.

There was genuine curiosity and a sense of exploration as we were invited to consider how we may learn through epiphany, improvisation, and play; or learn collaboratively as communities of inquiry, together with research participants. The presentations and corridor conversations had a deep, reflexive character as we asked ourselves and each other how we may want to engage in research and how we understand the core values and ethics of adult education. Some took the route of theoretical work, clearing some conceptual ground, while others engaged directly with pedagogical questions of how we might want to teach and what could be worth learning.

The conference was marked by a strong sense of care and conviviality – a conscious attempt to create a democratic ethos at the event – and an equally strong sense of urgency about supporting active citizenship and democratic renewal. Reflecting on this conference participants discussed the need to work in a truly interdisciplinary and methodologically innovative way that connects researchers to the public. It is therefore fitting that part of the conference programme involved city walks to better understand grassroots arts and activist initiatives in Belgrade and that throughout the conference there were massive demonstrations in the city directly related to democracy and human flourishing.

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