

In from the Margins: Adult Education, Work and Civil Society

Antikainen, Ari, Harinen, Päivi and Torres, Carlos Alberto (eds.), 2006

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This book comprises a collection of papers drawn from a conference in the University of Joensuu, Finland in May 2005. The objective of the conference was to examine issues of exclusion/inclusion and to explore the nature of participation and non-participation in adult education in a globalised world. The collection gives readers a critical and thoughtful analysis on a selection of topics in the field. The articles are arranged in four parts using headings that represent contemporary topics of concern to adult educators. This gives the book a coherent structure whereby the reader may dip in and out of each part depending on their interests. However as the first part, 'Critical perspectives' provides a useful context for the book thus it is a good place to begin.

The changing nature of approaches to adult education and the impact of efforts to mainstream it are explored in this part of the book. A discussion of theories and policy and the impact of globalisation on the politics of adult education expose some of the struggles within the discipline itself. The impact of neoliberal ideologies on political pedagogies 'traditionally concerned with developing what Paulo Freire called a "pedagogy of the oppressed"' (Martin: p. 12) is addressed. It is suggested that adult educators have become more concerned with personal ambitions for academic achievement while neglecting the role of adult education as public sociology. Carlos Torres argues that policy has been non-existent in many countries and where it does exist it is often based on 'technocratic thinking' and 'guided to a large extent by an instrumental rationality' (p. 4). With its roots in local communities, it is argued that adult

education has the potential to stimulate opposition to neoliberal politics and globalisation through mobilisation of social movements for change. However, this assumes that adult educators are a homogeneous group which is not the case. They are differentiated by their pedagogical and philosophical approaches but more especially by their political positions. This means that there is no unity of purpose making efforts to tackle neoliberalism difficult.

The section on 'Active citizenship and participation' offers an overview of issues related to participation in education, civil society and work. Research into barriers to participation as experienced by immigrant groups is examined. Adult education is challenged to facilitate learning that would enable these groups to actively influence change in the social, legal and political systems of which they are a part. This is of particular significance because migration and dual citizenship is becoming the norm and notions of national identity are shifting making identities based on nationhood more problematic. Identity is also very important when analysing patterns of participation in education. Antikainen notes that learner identities are constructed in school experiences and that learning orientations are significantly influenced by levels of achievements: practical orientations are attached to negative experiences while those with more theoretical orientations are attached to positive experiences. These in turn affect participation. The puzzle of non-participation continues to be a focus in the next section.

'Adult learners in different contexts' further examines the experience of non-participants, dissenters and those who choose not to participate in education. Women in rural Finland expressed no desire for formal education because they stated that their achievements in business give them a sense of empowerment and self worth. A survey of women cleaners' attitudes to education provided similar results. They were interested in work rather than education and felt that work references were more important to employers than educational awards. Both pieces of research discuss the prevailing dichotomy that continues to exist about theory/practice in education and consider whether the high status traditionally attached to theoretical learning remains valid. It is argued that much of what we value as learning is only understood if it is validated in an award structure. However there is a growing realisation that many do not want or need awards to have their knowledge acknowledged. They recognise that they can gain 'really useful knowledge' in experience and create their own path 'towards becoming a better human being' (p. 293).

In 'Challenging the digital divide' case studies and research is provided on the experiences of learners using ICT. Access to broadband continues to be a problem for many, however even when this is overcome the level of use depends on individual competencies and access to specialist training. Women taking an eLearning course on the Greek islands discovered that online learning is time consuming and very demanding. They struggled to balance learning, life and family – a common problem for all part-time learners but in particular for women who are more likely to be constrained by the pressures of childcare and domestic responsibilities. The articles in this part of the book show that the use of ICT for community engagement and learning continues to be challenging and that although many advances have been made in the last decade, universal access is still a long way off.

Overall this book provides a reflexive and coherent set of articles that engage the reader in an ongoing critical conversation about the nature and role of adult education in realising equality of opportunity in education and in building a more egalitarian and just society. It highlights the necessity for practitioners to engage in continual reflexivity

to ensure that radical pedagogies retain their voice and power and are not muted by neoliberal rhetoric. All the old issues of the past remain current as research shows that student participation continues to be hampered by issues related to cultural, social and economic poverty. Since this book was published in 2006 the Western world has been thrown into a spin of economic disasters that have hit the foundations of capitalism in many European states. Poverty is becoming even more endemic in many regions. As the crisis deepens the future becomes even more uncertain. Thus it could be an opportune time to reawaken the social and political purpose of adult education by fostering pedagogies of opposition as an antidote to the neoliberal pandemic that holds instrumental rationalism as the core value and purpose of education. *In from the Margins* provides an excellent argument for rekindling the mission of radical adult education and placing it once again at the centre of the discipline, the practice and the movement.

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