RESEARCHING AND TRANSFORMING ADULT LEARNING AND COMMUNITIES

BOOK REVIEW

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The book presents the research into adult education and learning in community-based environments in a number of countries including Belgium, Canada, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK with a variety of methodological approaches and theoretical backgrounds adopted by the researchers. The critical perspective to studying adult education as a transformative process unites the individual contributions into a coherent whole. The book is comprised of three sections with 4 to 6 chapters in each section.

The articles of the first section (The Bigger Picture) present some important local and global dimensions of community development through adult education looking into a wide range of the community-context related factors including the socio-cultural and economic, individual and collective. Budd Hall gives a review of some worldwide trends in community-based research, and explores creation of critical social knowledge as a pathway to the global knowledge democracy movement. Emilio Lucio-Villegas and Antonio Fragoso provide an analysis of the role of a community educator in the perspective of mediation practice and social change pointing out that popular education processes are closely linked to community development on which the educator may make a crucial and organic impact through mediation and promotion of participation. Rozalia Ligus presents the results of a

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longitudinal research into community symbolic social spaces in some peripheral Polish communities showing the impact of locally constructed meanings of community on opening new learning spaces. Ana Bilon and Ewa Kurantowicz’s study focuses on local and global dimensions of community development with respect to EU policies embodied in the implementation of community projects in Poland and their reflection in socio-cultural and economic processes.

The articles of the second section (Adult Learning and Communities) present community teaching and learning in the adult educator or adult learner perspective. The common ground of the variety of local and regional contexts reflected in individual contributions in this section is manifested through the concern with the contradictions between the individualised needs and collective interests of the wider community and society. Pyollim Hong and Jim Crowther analyse young adults’ citizenship education in Scotland through the perceptions of young people and community educators, identifying learning for membership, entrepreneurial citizenship, formal political participation and learning for activism as the main domains of citizenship learning in community spaces. The authors point out a trend of citizenship learning in the community being increasingly “dominated by an entrepreneurial model of citizenship” (p.68) whereas a broader range of citizenship education is decreasing. Chris Parson focuses on participatory methodology in adult literacy education in five European countries. Drawing on experiences of adult learners, educators and managers, the author argues that application of participatory methodologies may facilitate transformations in adult literacy education through giving power to learners’ voices. Adrianna Nizinska’s study of social capital as a resource of adult learning shows that integration of social dimensions may both enhance adult learning and trigger social change. Isabel Gomes and Alcides Monteiro look into the changing adult educator’s roles in the context of a developing system of policies and practices in Portugal undergoing the impact of tensions between different adult education approaches. Paul De Roo analyses education of immigrant children faced with contrary cultural and economic contexts as a learning environment. Ozlem Unlusaricikli looks into the learning experiences of adult education participants and highlights its positive impact on the lives of adult learners.

The chapters of the third section (Learning in Social Movements and Local Change – Research at Close Quarters) present fieldwork on community learning processes in social movements with focus on the construction of identity, empowerment and agency, and the transformative effects on community development. Antonio Fragoso and Edmee Ollagnier’s contribution, based on a case study in Portugal, reveals how women’s involvement in training facilitates emancipatory community development. Lyn Tett analyses the dynamics of power in the development of a learning community as a transformative process drawing on a case study of a learning community in Scotland. Joaquim Do Arco focuses on social transformation
through development of adult education in rural communities in Portugal. Angela Pilch Ortega analyses adult learning processes as transformation in the context of emancipatory social movements in Mexico showing that knowledge construction in informal processes of adult learning takes place in problem-solving movements. Onur Seckin reveals a relationship between learning and active participation in a social movement through her study of an environmental social movement in Turkey.

In the introduction the editors argue that adult education and learning can only be understood with reference to community. The book can be seen as an attempt to recover this view and show the necessity “to rethink the role of adult education and learning in community processes” (p.2). The transformative perspective following Paulo Freire views the community and transformation as interrelated in the process of turning from individual action to social action for community transformation. The editors also make a strong argument for Participatory Research as a research methodology on learning for social change. The reader will appreciate the authors’ attempt to challenge the narrow concept of community as a homogeneous space and embrace “the different roles it can play in people’s daily lives, either as a place of shelter or as a place of confrontation and debate” (p.9). The emphasis on diversity in this book also reflects the unity among the different perspectives adopted by the contributors as it is “coherent with the diversity of communities in relation to development, social change and education” (p.11).

True to the purpose stated by the editors, the book demonstrates the complexity of critical research into adult learning in the community context as affected by numerous local and global factors, and offers further critical inquiry into the emancipatory perspective of adult learning. I believe that the book will prove particularly relevant to researchers of community processes and adult learning, and also to education practitioners and policy makers interested in social change and the role of adult learning in transforming communities.