



The pulse of freedom: Learning from experiments in democracy

A series of research dialogues from Winter into Spring 2021, organized by the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) Research Network on Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning (ADCAL)

An invitation

The pandemic means the 2020 Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning (ADCAL) biannual conference was postponed. We look forward to holding a conference as soon as we can. In the meantime, as we wait for the vaccine and public health measure to make this possible, we feel there is a need to sustain our research community through meaningful dialogue. For that reason, we want to invite interested researchers to participate in a series of virtual discussions on ‘learning from experiments in democracy’ on the 25th of February, the 26th of March and the 30th of April. We intend that each session will run over an afternoon (2-5pm CET) with breaks.

Context and rationale for dialogues on democratic possibilities

These have been in many respects dark times and we want to very consciously turn our face to questions of possibility. We want to ask where currently and historically we can discern ‘the pulse of freedom’ and living democracy? Democracy is never completed nor achieved as it is in constant creation and crisis. The progress happens in leaps, occasionally through experiments and trials that are more or less successful but do not always last. To use the words of the US sociologist Erik Olin Wright (2014) we wish in these discussions to 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. We propose that the meaning of active citizenship is elaborated and altered through these experiments and collective actions. Citizenship education therefore goes beyond a defined set of competences that prepare people to act and participate in public sphere. Instead, learning emerges as part of a constant effort to establish spaces of freedom. We might never be fully prepared to act in advance of a specific situation, but through action new knowledge is produced.

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). We are interested in the large and

sustained experiments but also the passing and momentary and the relationship between them.

We noted in the Call for Papers for our last conference that these are precarious times (<https://liu.se/en/research/esrea-conference-2018>). 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. The polycrisis has been further complicated by the Coronavirus pandemic.

In inviting you to discussions on democratic experimentation and ‘real utopias’ we certainly do 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.

We welcome any researchers and activists interested in exploring experiments in democratic adult education and learning. The following questions provide some examples of the issues that could be dealt with in this series of research dialogues:

- What pedagogies, research methodologies and institutional initiatives are being used, or have been used historically, 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?

Using an open and dialogical format

Over the past three years our network has actively sought to create convivial, dialogical spaces for researchers on adult education and learning which are genuinely participatory and developmental. Our experience in the past ten months suggests that creating such spaces virtually is very difficult and online academic events are often tiring, frequently dissatisfying and sometimes alienating. Part of this is due to what we lose and simply cannot replace – the subtlety and joy of embodied encounters – in using virtual platforms but part of this is also due to sticking too closely to a familiar format in radically different circumstances. We need to experiment and adapt, and we think taking account of what might work in time, scale and process is crucial.

Instead of meeting for two or three days in a row we suggest three sessions between February and April 2021 to spend time listening and speaking with each other as the days lengthen and Spring arrives. The dialogue series will be free and will be open to anyone who expresses interest. We expect this can only be done in meaningful way with no more than 15-20 participants. Should there be a bigger number of applicants than this we will employ the 'first come, first served' principle.

For this to work we need to be a small but diverse group, who are willing to commit to reading and writing in advance of the sessions and participating through the full cycle of dialogues. We will consult with participants and ask for feedback on the proposed format we develop.

How to participate

To begin this process, we want to ask you to send an email with an expression of interest, explaining what you might like to discuss and how this links to your research/teaching/activism. It does not have to be long (say 200 words) and feel free to append a piece of writing (that is in progress or has been already published), video clip or an article or chapter by someone else you think might be useful to such conversations. The sessions are meant to open and can accommodate a wide set of interests and ask only this is linked to the theme democratic possibilities.

On the basis of the expressions of interest and the material sent, the convenors will then create a shared repository of material and a programme.

We actively encourage various formats and modes of communication of research. We also very much want this to be a space for early researchers and we welcome proposals which are based on trying to puzzle out the beginnings of a research project as well as contributions from established researchers. We should say we hope that the discussion might help to identify future research proposals and publications we might undertake to do collectively or in smaller groups.

If you have any queries or have decided you want to participate please send us your expression of interest adcal.esrea@gmail.com by 7th February.

We are looking forward to hearing your suggestions,

Fergal Finnegan, Maja Maksimovic and Annika Pastuhov

About the Research network ADCAL (Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning)

From <http://esrea.org/networks/active-democratic-citizenship-and-adult-learning/>

What, if anything, is the role of adult learning and education in fostering active democratic citizenship and the making of a democratic society? The ADC network is dedicated to exploring these central and longstanding questions through research, debate and discussion of active citizenship by studying and reflecting on these issues. We are 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. The ADC network welcomes a variety of approaches dealing with the nature,

possibilities and limits of adult education in encouraging active citizenship and promoting democracy as well as relations between and changing roles of

- adult education and active citizenship,
- adult education, democracy and democratization,
- popular education and social movement learning,
- adult learning and (active) citizenship, democracy and democratization,
- local, national and global citizenship.

About ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults)

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.

To find out more about ESREA please visit www.esrea.org

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