

European Society *for* Research *on the* Education of Adults

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Dear members,

We go on with our series of snapshots on 30 years ESREA history with personal reflexions and reminiscences from three women who played an essential role in making ESREA more inclusive. Agnieszka Bron, Barbara Merrill and Laura Formenti joined ESREA quite early in the 1990s and at different stages of their carrer. Their stories show that ESREA owes its success in large part to the fresh perspectives, original ideas, inclusive approaches and committed work of its female members.

Take a moment, look back and enjoy the stories!

Yours,
Alexandra



1. Some personal reminiscence on ESREA's beginning

Agnieszka Bron

Stockholm University, Sweden

How has it happened that I was involved in ESREA both as a founding member, an interim and elected steering committee member as well as convener of one network, while involved in many others?

I was involved with Adult Education at Warsaw University (from 1970), first as a Masters' student at the Faculty of Psychology and Education, then as a researcher and lecturer (from 1975). Already I believed that the status of our discipline depends on stringent research to understand adults learning as a social process happening in real life. As psychologists at this time limited their interest in human learning to children and adolescents, saying that a person develops fully already in his/her twenties, many of us turned to sociology. The latter gave us also prospects of seeing an individual as a social being, constrained by society and yet being able to develop using agency. To understand learning as a process in which gender, class and ethnicity became eventually very important.

When I was established as a researcher at Uppsala University, Sweden (since 1983), Barry Hake, whom I met in 1989 at the conference in Aachen, contacted me and asked me to be involved in the project on the early history (1750 -1800) of social movements, and liberal adult education. Together with Jindra Kulich from Vancouver University (a very dear friend) he announced the project: *Historical perspectives on social movements and adult education*. I think that Barry's historical project was a beginning of creating a network of adult education researchers. My part covered Sweden, while other scholars embraced other parts of Europe. However, the financial contribution never came, neither for collecting the data nor for publication. I managed at least to publish my part in August 1991 through Linköping University.

On 15 March 1991 I received a letter from Barry saying that my contribution will be published soon. In the same letter he wrote: "I write to you at this point of time with regard to the establishment of a European Society for Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA). This idea has been doing the rounds informally among a few well-known figures in universities from a number of countries who meet one another regularly at conferences and are involved in ERASMUS projects etc. It would be a society similar to SCUTREA with an annual conference, seminars and workshops, and possibly a European journal for research in adult education". He wanted to explore the possibilities for such a society for academics in adult education and asked me to recommend "some competent and internationally oriented academics from Poland", which I did, and I warmly welcomed his initiative. I even introduced to him some colleagues from Belgium and Germany, and we exchanged several letters. By March 19th Barry had seven supporters - all male.

In the beginning of December 1991 at the residential college near Leiden an inaugural meeting of the provisional steering committee took place. We were 13 persons including two women (Sallie Westwood and me). Additional 12 invited people sent apologies, including three women. The Chair of ESREA became Kjell Rubenson, while the Secretary was Barry Hake.

At that meeting we discussed how ESREA could function in the best way in relation to the constitution, recruitment of members, chairperson's and secretariat's role, steering committee, membership fees, ESREA research seminar in 1992 etc. In May 1992 the first Newsletter was published and presented this European society as "a major new initiative by academics at universities throughout Europe who are engaged in research on the education of adults". Hence all researchers interested in education of adults were welcome. NB there were already many national and international adult education associations but these were committed to practice. This unique initiative of Barry Hake was to approach academics devoted to research and to cover the whole of Europe. This excellently suited my own ideas on discipline development. We created several research networks, and in 1995 in Strobl, Austria the first conference took place.

I sat on the interim steering committee until we had a proper election and I was elected several times. The second time we met in Manchester in April 1992. This was especially important for me as I met Edmée Ollagnier who came instead of Pierre Dominicé. This was a start of a long friendship and research cooperation. I even took over, after the first year, as a convener of the Adult

Education and Citizenship network (in 1994). Meanwhile, I was involved in the Life history and Biographical Research network from the beginning, i.e. 1993, and Access for Adult Students to HE (started 1994) and Gender Issues in AE (from 1995).

Our first Life History and Biographical research conference took place in Geneva (1993), and was organized by Pierre Dominicé in collaboration with Peter Alheit and Agnieszka Bron. I brought people from Sweden* at that time, as well as from Poland and Denmark. In 1996 Barbara Merrill and Edmée Ollagnier came to Stockholm for a conference on Education for the 21st Century participating in the section: Gender and women studies which I chaired**. At the lunch in Ulva Kvarn near Uppsala we decided to activate the network: Gender and Adult learning. We organised the first meeting in 1999 at Ruhr-Universität Bochum where I had a Chair in International Adult Education. Edmée became a first network convener***.

From the very beginning women were in minority. Among the Directory of Founding members (1991) we can read that 9 were women and 40 were men. Since then many women researchers have joined ESREA, but we had only once in its history a female president, Laura Formenti.



*At the Geneva airport to the first Life history and biographical research conference.

From left to right: Agnieszka Bron, Maria Gustavsson, Maj Klasson, Gunilla Härnsten, Inga Elgqvist-Saltzman
(Private photograph)

**see Wulf, C. (Ed.) et al. *Commonalities and Diversities in Europe*. Berlin: FU Berlin.

2. A personal reflection on ESREA

Barbara Merrill

University of Warwick, UK

I first became involved in university adult education in 1991 when I began working in the Department of Continuing Education, University of Warwick, UK at the time that ESREA was being formed. I had previously worked as a teacher at a multi-cultural community secondary school so it was my first experience of undertaking research and teaching adults rather than 14-18 year olds. I first heard about ESREA through my then head of department Chris Duke, Etienne Bourgeois and Agnieszka Bron with whom we were involved in a research project. They both attended the 1st Triennial Conference in Strobl in 1995. I had wanted to go as well as the topic related to my PhD research and the research we were undertaking but unfortunately there was no funding available but Chris Duke did inform me about it afterwards.

I became involved in ESREA in a tangible way for in 1996 when I became a co-convenor with Chris Duke and Etienne Bourgeois of the then called ESREA Access Research Network. We held our first network conference at the University of Leeds, UK hosted by Richard Taylor and a publication was produced. I later became the sole convenor for a number of years and changed the name of the network to ESREA Access. Learning Careers and Identities to reflect the changing nature of research in this field. And this is something which ESREA as an organisation has always done. There are now three of us convening this network: myself, Andrea Galimberti and Antonio Fragoso and formerly Adrianna Nizinska

At the SCUTREA 2001 conference, University of East London I met Henning Salling Olesen and it was here that Henning asked me to consider standing to become a member of the ESREA Steering Committee. I was elected later that year and this was the beginning of my further involvement with ESREA. My first SC meeting was in Geneva in 2002 – see the photo below.

Participation in ESREA led to several European research projects, involving ESREA members. This led to a long-lasting research involvement with people such as Peter Alheit, Etienne Bourgeois, Agnieszka Bron, John Field, Antonio Fragoso, Fergal Finnegan Ewa Kurantowicz, José González-Monteagudo, and Linden West. This research would not have happened without ESREA and resulted in a cross European sharing of knowledge and practice in relation to access, inequalities and experiences of adult students in high education as well as a sharing of diverse approaches to life history and biographical methods.

ESREA, like other adult education organisations in the 1990s was dominated by men and gender issues in adult education were rarely discussed within ESREA. Three of us (Agnieszka Bron, Edmee Ollagnier and myself) decided to do something about it by making gender research and issues visible in ESREA through the setting up of the Gender and Adult Learning Network – see the account by Agnieszka Bron. ESREA as an organisation has also largely been dominated by men in relation to the Secretariat and Chair so it was refreshing when Laura Formenti became Chair and then Alexandra Ioannidou as Secretary.

The ESREA Biography and Life History Network has also had an important influence on my approaches to biographical research and over the years I have attended many of their network conferences. Importantly it has had a significant impact in the development of life history/biographical methods across Europe so that they have become a dominant method in European adult education research. This was articulated through the publication of a book in 2007: *Using Biographical and Life History Approaches in the Study of Adult and Lifelong Learning: European Perspectives*, edited by Linden West, Peter Alheit, Anders Siig Andersen and Barbara Merrill. This was published through the ESREA book series with Peter Lang and which is now with Brill publishers.

As a native English speaking person I have been conscious that the majority of colleagues do not have this advantage when attending Steering Committee meetings and conferences. The language issue is something which has been discussed at SC meetings and within some networks. While it is necessary to use a common language the Access, Learning Careers and Identities and the Biography and Life History networks have tried to include people for whom English is difficult by enabling them to present in their own language and translated by another person.

In recent years ESREA has become more essential to me and other UK researchers with the decline of university adult education departments and now Brexit. The UK Government and those who voted for Brexit may have decided that we are an island and do not need Europe anymore but it is now more important than ever, I feel, for me and other UK researchers to remain in close contact with our European colleagues. The day the Brexit vote was announced I was at a research project meeting in Wroclaw with other ESREA members – it was a very sad day. But I do have, as a result of ESREA, lots of colleagues

and friends across Europe and beyond. ESREA has also had a key influence on my research and the type of research I have undertaken. ESREA as an organisation is thriving and, hopefully will continue to offer a space for dialogue amongst adult education researchers.



Photo: Steering Committee meeting, Geneva, 2002

From left to right: Barbara Merrill, Edmee Ollagnier, Agnieszka Bron, Peter Alheit, Barry Hake, Rudi Tippelt, Jukka Tuomisto, Anita Jakobsone, Philippe Carré, ?, Henning Salling Olesen, Ewa Kurantowicz, Linden West.
(Private photograph)

3. My Journey with ESREA

Laura Formenti

University of Milano Bicocca, Italy

As an ESREA member, I climbed the whole ladder from PhD student to Network Convenor, member then chair of the Steering Committee, starting as a marginal Italian woman, somehow voiceless, to become an engaged and caring decision maker. It took time to learn how to be a part of this community, that I use to call “my academic family”, since I was born as a researcher in adult education and learning the day I joined “my” research network. It was March 3, 1993. A cold winter day in Geneva. I was pregnant of my first child, just awarded a PhD position in education, and scared about being the newcomer in the playground, not knowing anybody or anything about adult education. I just had a vague interest in autobiography. Besides, I had nothing to present, since I had been informed about the conference only one week before.

A tall man in the lobby, dark inquiring eyes and a deep voice – Pierre Dominicé – welcomed me and explained: “This is our first conference, ESREA has just been founded, so we need to know each other. Who are you? What can you do for this community? You should not be only listening”. Pierre, a French-Swiss, had been working with professionals and brought to the network his passion for questions: he questioned the way adults (researchers too) build their own identity and position themselves in the learning situation. He praised the capacity to reflect on the formative process, the enables an adult to achieve a relative freedom and choose what to do next. I had been working in Geneva in the same Department and never met him before! No surprise: my degree in psychology had worked as a barrier in keeping us apart. Only a few years later my mentor in Geneva – Alberto Munari – and Pierre Dominicé started together a Master program on complexity and biography, where I became an invited teacher.

Back to the first conference: that kind of warmth was unknown to me, accustomed to more vertical “Stay shut and listen” relationships. Since I spoke French and English, Pierre proposed that I could translate, so I became a far-fetched linguistic and cultural mediator between English speaking North-Europeans, French speaking Portuguese scholars, and English or French mother-tongue minorities. A Babylon where even translating such a fundamental word as “education” was an issue. At the end, I was weary, puzzled, and grateful that I had been able to give, to be a part of the group; being active had brought recognition, as I would say now, quoting Honneth.

The second convener, Peter Alheit acknowledged my work with Maturana and Varela, whom he also had referred to in his presentation; a conversation with him over a coffee suggested that I was not a total outsider. He combined the subjective dimension of self-narratives with a sociological imagination; it was the epiphany, for me, of a constitutive relationship between micro and macro-levels of interpretation in learning lives and stories.

Agnieszka Bron was the third convenor, younger than the two men and fiercely living the challenge of being a woman between two strong male personalities. Or maybe this is only my interpretation. The many women in the Network, besides Agnieszka - Barbara Merrill, Marie Christine Josso, Gunilla Härnsten, Marianne Horsdal - appeared to me different from most academic women I had met. They became mentors and role models, ready to share, not competitive, curious, creative, yet capable to position themselves as subjects in the relationship with power. With men. It may seem strange that I celebrate these qualities, before their rigor, intelligence, and scientific contribution, but it is not. For a working-class female student of my generation, an unexpected subject in the academic world, a diploma as a primary school teacher was the highest point of ambition. So, I often felt like a fish out of water, like I did not have the profile to be good enough. Feminist adult educators and researchers taught to me why I felt that way and how I could learn to talk back to power.

Thanks to biographic research, I started to read my own career and story. When Linden West became a convener, he encouraged me, along with Peter Alheit and Edmee Ollaigner, to become more active. He was building ideas around the auto/biographical relationship, using Winnicott’s concept of a good enough relationship, considering the interview (or the class) as a transitional space. Our conferences became an open-air laboratory for dialogic inquiry, a place to explore ideas creatively, where everybody could feel worthy and take the stand. This needed much care and attention, as well as rigor in constructing good reasons for doing this.

I became LHBN’s convenor in 2009, then entered the Steering Committee. Here, six years as Chair (2014-2019) taught me a lot. ESREA is a fascinating diverse world, of many languages, academic cultures, theories, paradigms, and methods. I feel no need to establish a standard or a winning paradigm. Instead, a European Society should acknowledge the geographical,

linguistic, epistemological plurality of research landscapes. Researchers bring their perspectives, values, and culture. Not least, academic cultures, that used to be very different when I started. Now, far less: neoliberal ideas are pervasive, academic colonization is very powerful. I am worried of silenced philosophies or research and voices, so I express my good wishes for ESREA: to be as diverse as possible, and a family for many other researchers to come.



Photo: Laura Formenti

4. New Faces in ESREA



Hervé Breton (University of Tours) is the new co-convenor of the Life History and Biography Network and will support the two convenors Laura Formenti (University of Milano-Bicocca) and Alan Bainbridge (Canterbury Christ Church University) in this funktion . We would like to thank Linden West (Canterbury Christ Church University) for his commitment in the Network and in several functions in ESREA all these years.

All information on ESREA networks and their convenors can be found at: <http://esrea.org/networks/>

5. Announcements - Conferences, Network Meetings and Calls for papers

Conferences

June 3 – 6, 2021 Canada, Vancouver

ESREA is partner organisation in the [Adult Education in Global Times: An International Research Conference \(AEGT2021\)](#) – organised by the Department of Educational Studies ([ubc.ca](#))

June 9, June 11 & June 16, 2021

Online Seminars of the Network Policy Studies in Adult Education on “*Critical Policy Research in Challenging Political Contexts*”. You can register (book a ticket) online using the Eventbrite links by 31 May.

– Seminar 1: Wed. 9 June 15:00-16:20 CET: “Critical Voices Between PIAAC and New Literacy Studies” Details and registration at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/critical-voices-between-piaac-and-new-literacy-studies-tickets-151233115319>

– Seminar 2: Fri. 11 June 15:00-16:20 CET: “Lifelong Learning, Global Social Justice and Sustainability” Details and registration at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/lifelong-learning-global-social-justice-sustainability-tickets-151084127693>

– Seminar 3: Wed. 16 June 15:00-16:20 CET “Study of Adult Education in Different Political Contexts & the Impact of Political Context on Research into Adult Education” Details and registration at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/study-of-adult-education-in-different-political-contexts-tickets-151234920719>

August 29- September 3, 2021 Denmark, Aalborg University

Summer School on ‘*International Perspectives on education Policy*’ (IPEP) [Handbook](#)

September 16 – 18, 2021 Spain, Seville

ESREA Conference of the Network Between Global and Local – Adult Learning and Communities *Conference on ‘Looking back for the future. Reconsidering adult learning and communities’*

[Call for Papers](#)

Oktober 29, 2021

ESREA Conference of the Research Network for Adult Educators, Trainers and their Professionalisation on ‘*Adult Educators in time of crisis: Well-being, Changes in Identity and Professional Practice in European Adult Education*’.

[Call for papers](#)

Save the date: 10th Triennial Conference

The next ESREA Triennial Conference will take place **on September 29 - Oktober 2, 2022 at the University of Milano Bicocca, Milano, Italy.**

Save the date: 2022 ESREA Spring School for Doctoral Students

The ESREA Klagenfurt Research Retreat will focus on ‘*Research on Adult Education and Transformation: Mapping Possibilities and Embracing Complexity*’. It will take place between 16th - 20th of May 2022 at *Universität Klagenfurt*, Austria in collaboration with the Maynooth University, Ireland and *Universität Hagen*, Germany.

For preliminary information, please click [here](#).

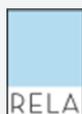
Save the date: Conference of the ESREA Network Gender and Adult Education

The Network Conference on ‘*Gender and Adult Education in the era of social and cultural changes: (New) risks and challenges*’ originally scheduled for July 2021 has been postponed for

July 15 – 17, 2022 Portugal, University of Algarve

[Call for Papers](#)

6. RELA



The **European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA)** is a refereed academic journal creating a forum for the publication of critical research on adult education and learning. RELA is published on behalf of ESREA and can be found at our webpage: <http://www.esrea.org/publications/rela/>

Current Call for Paper on 30 years of research on adult education, 30 years of ESREA can be found at: <http://esrea.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CfP-ESREA-30-years-final.pdf>

7. Publications

A new book on '[Learner-centred education for migrants in Europe: A critical comparative analysis](#)' by Maria N. Gravani & Bonnie Slade is now available. The book addresses the lack of research on how LCE is used in adult education as a tool for social change across different national contexts. For more information, please click [here](#).

All publications of the ESREA networks can be found at: <http://esrea.org/publications/books-from-the-networks/>

8. How to become a member of ESREA e.V.

Membership in ESREA is open to individual and institutional members. As a member you will get a reduced fee at ESREA activities, information in the field of research on the education of adults through the ESREA mailing list and newsletter. As an individual member you have the right to vote at the general assembly that takes place each year (online through postal ballot). As an institutional member, all employees of your institution are entitled to participate in ESREA activities at a reduced fee. Note that institutional members have only one vote in the general assembly.

If you want to become a member the process is the following:

1. Download the document at: <http://www.esrea.org/about-us/membership/>
2. Fill in the membership application form and e-mail it to: ESREASecretary@die-bonn.de.
3. Within two weeks at the latest you will receive a confirmation of your membership by e-mail
4. An invoice for your membership fee will be issued: 50 Euros for individual members, 25 Euros for students and PhD students and 150 Euros for institutional members. **Payment of membership fees can only be made through an international or EU bank transfer. Cheques are not accepted. Any foreign bank fees are to be borne by the applicants.**

ESREA Bank details for membership fee:

Bank: Sparkasse KölnBonn

Account holder: European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) e.V.

Account number: 1934820174

IBAN: DE73 3705 0198 1934 8201 74

BIC: COLSDE33XXX

VAT Number: DE324070933

9. Forthcoming newsletters

Deadlines for 2021

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December, 2021

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