

**Thematic issue of RELA:
Widening the scope. Methodological and theoretical considerations on
research in adult and continuing education**

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In line with earlier papers discussing the methodologies used in adult education research (Brookfield, 1982, 1985, Bagnall, 1989, Rubenson, 2000, Fejes & Nylander, 2015, Boeren, 2018), we argue for deepening the reflection on the use of diverse research methodologies in the field of adult and continuing education. Stephen Brookfield, while moving as a researcher from the UK to the US in the early eighties, observed different traditions in the research approaches at both sides of the Atlantic. In the US, adult education research was mainly quantitative, although things seemed to be shifting at that time. In the UK, the research focused predominantly on philosophical and historical issues, while using mainly qualitative methods. Through his analysis, he draws until today our attention on the fact that the differential use of methodologies must be understood as 'reflective of a broader culture' (1985, p. 313).

Kjell Rubenson (1982, 2000) was also among the first to systematically map trends and tendencies in research in adult education. In his paper 'Revisiting the Map of the Territory' (2000), he observed - through his analysis of a variety of sources in adult education research - the separation of empirically and normatively informed arguments. On the one hand, there is a multiplicity of loosely connected, small empirical studies focusing on isolated phenomena. On the other hand, he noticed well-elaborated theoretical considerations discussing normative issues related to the field of practice. Both types of research seemed to live more or less separate lives and, in addition, he pointed to 'a hesitancy to engage empirically in fundamental Issues of learning nature currently facing society' (Rubenson, 2000, p. 399). This situation had been reinforced by a noticeable reluctance among adult education researchers to engage in large scale empirical studies. These and other observations brought Rubenson to formulate the paradox of adult education research at the turn of the millennium: while there is a wide recognition of the necessity of lifelong learning - including adult education and training - to cope with present day societal challenges, the research field of adult and continuing education, as represented in the main journals and books, struggles with only a marginal recognition in the wider context of the social sciences.

Fifteen years later, in their paper 'How pluralistic is the research field on adult education?' (2015), Fejes and Nylander presented a survey of three main international (notably: Anglophone) journals publishing research in the field of adult and continuing education (*Adult Education Quarterly*, *Studies in Continuing Education* and *The International Journal of Lifelong Education*). In their RELA-paper, they connected to earlier observations about shifts in research traditions in this domain. They reported about the transformation of the research paradigms in the late decades of the 20th century, from quantitative to qualitative research. They considered this development as a form of emancipation from the dominance of empirical-analytical oriented research in the social sciences, whereby quantitative approaches were being replaced by hermeneutic, phenomenological and critical perspectives. However, in line with Rubenson's remarks, they noticed that these qualitative approaches initially were not given much status in the wider context of social research. Further to these observations, Fejes and Nylander formulated some hypotheses about the increasing dominance of qualitative research in this domain, of which we present some here. A first explanation may have to do with the fact that the professors of adult and continuing education who have fought to have qualitative methods recognized, tend to give preference

to research initiatives that apply such methodology. Another, interconnected, explanation may be that research in this field is often done by people who have been active as practitioners and informed by epistemic perspectives that closely relate to their own professional practices. Also, the fact that qualitative research methods present better illustrations in the context of teaching practices and therefore, might motivate students better to identify with these practices, may play a role.

In this respect, Richard Bagnall's (1989) observation that different focusses of what one wants to know, require different research methodologies. He exemplified this with the distinction between three different views on participation: participation as presence, participation as involvement and participation as control. If one wants to investigate participation as presence in adult education classes, an empirical-analytical approach is adequate. However, when investigating participation as involvement in or control over the process by the participants, then an interpretive or critical approach is adequate. In addition, he observed that the bias in participation research towards empirical-analytical methods follows from the tendency to consider participation mainly in terms of 'presence', meaning the fact of being physically present in an adult education event.

Finally, in her recent paper 'The methodological underdog: a review of quantitative research methods in the key adult education journals' (2018), Ellen Boeren examined the strengths and weaknesses of adult education research as presented in the three same journals investigated earlier by Fejes and Nylander. In response to the observed limited presence of quantitative methods in adult education research, she focused on the consequences of this bias. Today, much research in the social sciences in general, including research on lifelong learning, is geared towards the collection and interpretation of 'big data'. International institutions such as OECD, UNESCO and the European Commission stimulate such research. Relevant data sets are available by means of these institutions, which could well be used for further interpretation by researchers in adult education. The same applies to data assembled in projects run by these institutions such as the Eurostat Adult Education Survey, or PIAAC'S survey of adult skills. A specific adult education perspective could, in her view, help to reorient the predominantly economic focus of many of these research initiatives towards more educational perspectives. Yet, in order to achieve such an objective, important efforts will be necessary to improve the skills of adult education researchers with regards to large-scale quantitative methods.

Against this backdrop, we would argue that the widening of the scope of adult education research to "lifelong learning" on a societal scale, which is drawing the interest of international political organizations, does not necessarily set the tone for favoring quantitative methodology. It is indeed a fact that much of the data production and politically oriented analysis is admittedly applying relatively traditional quantitative methods of economy and sociology. Nonetheless, it matters to consider that 'what is going on in our age of measurement is getting us any closer to an understanding of what makes education *good* rather than what makes it merely effective or efficient' (Biesta, 2020, p. 100). Or in other words, the question remains if these approaches deliver valid answers to the breadth of important political and practical issues of lifelong learning. The challenge could also be, in continuation of Bagnall's argument, to develop types of research based on practical epistemic interests (e.g. hermeneutic methods, biography, ethnographic field work) from an ad hoc micro perspective to a societal perspective (Salling Olesen, 2006). Excellent examples of such research practices in adult education have recently been collected by Bernie Grummel and Fergal Finnegan in their edited book 'Doing Critical and Creative Research in Adult Education' (2020).

The more general question is, thus, whether the choice of particular methodologies, be they quantitative or qualitative, or practicing mixed methods, is just a technical matter of connecting research objectives to methodologies. There are questions regarding research that go beyond such purely instrumental questions. The editors of the British Educational Research Journal, for instance, criticize the dominant claim that educational research should predominantly help to solve practical problems articulated by practitioners, or, challenges

identified by policy-makers (Biesta et al., 2019). They argue 'that in addition to enhancing the usefulness of educational research, that is, its capacity for *solving* problems, there is an ongoing need for research that *identifies* problems and, in that sense, *causes* problems. This kind of research challenges taken for granted assumptions about what is going on and what should be going on, and speaks back to expectations from policy and practice, not in order to deny such expectations but to engage in an ongoing debate about the legitimacy of such expectations - a debate that crucially should have a public quality and hence should take place in the public domain' (ibid, p. 1). Other important questions moving beyond the functional ones are asked by Mignolo (2005) who has argued from a post-colonial perspective that epistemologies, including research methodologies, are not necessarily neutral. They have geo-historical and biographical locations and are still predominantly eurocentric. This eurocentricism is carefully hidden 'in the social sciences, in the humanities, in the natural sciences and professional schools, in think tanks of the financial sector and the G8 and G20' (ibid, p. 2). Therefore, it remains vital to continually ask the question who, when and why is constructing knowledges and, whenever needed, to engage in epistemic disobedience.

We consider these repeated observations by various researchers mapping the field of adult education research, pointing to the existing biases and flaws in this domain, as an invitation to go deeper into the matter of epistemology and research methodology.

Following questions could serve as a guide to inspire contributions to this special issue:

- Should adult education researchers indeed reclaim the tradition of quantitative methods which seems to have now been outsourced to non-educational social scientists? If so, for what reason?
- What could be the relevance of connecting adult education research to the collection of big data organized by international institutions such as OECD and UNESCO?
- To what extent is the preferred use of quantitative, qualitative methodology or mixed methods related to particular objectives of adult education research?
- What are particular shortcomings in the methodological training of future adult education researchers? How could/should this be remediated?
- Should adult education research be problem-posing rather than problem-solving?
- To what extent do differences in the appreciation of methodologies reflect broader cultures?
- Is the choice for more qualitative (hermeneutical, biographical, ethnographical, ..) methods a sign of epistemic disobedience?

When looking for answers to these questions, we invite contributors to this special issue to engage not only into theoretical reflections about research paradigms or about the use of diverse research methodologies, but above all to present - in connection with the above questions - critical and creative research practices, thus, widening the scope of what is considered valid and relevant adult education research.

Deadline for submission of papers: 1st of November 2021.

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