

Bernd K apflinger & Steffi Robak

Adult Education for work and beyond

Adult education is often closely connected to processes of modernisation (Salling Olesen, 2014; Schrader, 2014). That is why it is also reasonable to explain adult education with the help of modernisation theories, although modernity is and must nowadays also be viewed critically, as modernisation often produces negative outcomes in many respects. The individual in particular might have the feeling of being lost in such big transitions and threatened by a loss of their identity. Economic development is often achieved at the cost of pollution and a lack of sustainability. The so-called first world is exporting production and pollution to the so-called third world. It would be naive to think of modernisation only in terms of improvement. Societies undergoing significant changes caused by technological, political, or social reasons have a greater need for adult education. People cannot be prepared for such changes solely by 'front-loading' in school and initial training. Who would have expected 20 years ago that the world would look the way it does now? There are huge limits and challenges in preparing for the unknown future. Education has to prepare for the unknown, and it has to have a wide scope beyond immediate needs, although the actions and decisions of political and economic leaders are often short-sighted.

It has become popular to perceive adult education within a framework of employability and related policies. Being flexible and able to adapt seems to be the only required ability. The lifelong learning agenda from cradle to grave has something offensive and oppressive. It is not by accident that many people feel resistance and annoyance when it comes to learning. Nobody is ready to learn everything all the time. Retraining can be highly stressful. Adult education researchers and practitioners in particular should be aware of that and think critically of employability policies with their implied ideal of flexible women and men. There is a rich tradition of such critical approaches in adult education, which are aware that learning is not something exclusively positive. There is awareness in the discipline that the individual is not always ready to learn and that this reluctance is often absolutely legitimate and has to be respected. Adults should be free to decide if they want to learn or not.

Thus, it is very helpful that this volume makes such intensive reference to policies. Scholars in adult education have to be aware of policies, because their work is highly influenced by them in many respects. At the same time, they have

to look beyond such policies and think critically about whether such policies really give serious consideration to the individual or collective points of view of learners and professionals. In many countries, there is presently strong criticism that policy-makers focus not enough on the people and their situations. Adult education, with its traditional focus on learners, bottom-up movements, and enlightenment, could play a key role in promoting different views in contrast to human resources management theories and top-down policies. The multi-layered system of adult education (cf. Schrader, 2014) cannot be governed top-down. This is only assumed by governments and administrations that overestimate their own influence and power.

The potential of adult education research and practice in offering different perspectives is far from being explored yet. This also means relating to one root of adult education, namely that in the labour movement. Educated workers also have to learn how to influence and shape their working conditions in relation to their own needs and interests. Adapting to the supposed needs of governments or big businesses is not enough. It would mean to lose a lot of the creativity and resources of workers, who often know much better than administrations what is needed in order to improve work results. Work nowadays should be organised beyond Taylorism and Neo-Taylorism, although work is very different in different parts of the world despite globalisation. It is very interesting to study the comparative approaches presented in this book. This book and the connected international W urzburg Summer School is a highly recommendable activity, one that is truly comparative. It enables us to learn more about each other. The Danish scholar Henning Salling Olesen wrote in 2014 (p. 54): ‘We may most productively see modernisation as an infinite process that is still dependent on human efforts and choices on individual, as well on global level.’ Considering the world’s present situation, it is important to remind us that we have to do something to avoid the end of modernisation by returning to oppressive neo-tribalist structures with their fraud and clientilism. Modernisation and democracy are no given, ever-lasting achievements but ongoing projects that require the global engagement and exchange of politicians, policy-makers, scholars, students, practitioners, and learners. This volume is a small but stimulating contribution to this endeavour.

References

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