

## Book review: Learning with adults: A critical pedagogical introduction

By Leona M. English and Peter Mayo. (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers., 2012) 269 pp., ISBN 9789460917684 (electronic bk.)

Written at a time when, for many, the neoliberal policies and globalization lead to an increasing confusion between education and training, as well as to the reification of the “theories of human capital”, this book addresses the critical pedagogy in the context of adult education in several fields.

English and Mayo remind us what education and educators should strive for. In a way, they propose a manifesto for education, leading us to question the ways in which the world is and to imagine how it could and should be. In fact, the whole book is crossed by an emancipatory vision and the need for a citizen’s commitment with education towards the collective building of a “better world”.

Actually, we are in the presence of a quite interesting book, written by two well-known authors, who have been publishing together in recent years, while carrying on their professional activities in different continents. Either individually, or in partnership, both have written several books and journal articles in the broad area of the critical education of adults. Leona English is professor of adult education at St. Francis Xavier University, in Nova Scotia. Her recent research interests are related with spirituality in adult education, gender and learning, as well as critical theory. Over the last few years, English developed her interests through a program of qualitative research informed by critical social science theories of postmodern/structuralism, namely in the fields of religion and education. In 2012, she published the book *Adult education and health* (University of Toronto Press). The co-author, Peter Mayo is professor at the Department of Education Studies (he was its Head for the period 2008-2012), Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Malta. He is also a member of the Collegio Docenti for the doctoral research program in Educational Sciences and Continuing Education at the Università degli Studi di Verona. Mayo teaches in the areas of sociology of education and adult continuing education, as well as in comparative and international education. Among his major contribution is a comparative analysis of Paulo Freire's and Antonio Gramsci's educational thinking.

Written by critical theory defenders, the entire book is crossed by many references to the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, one of the most remarkable thinkers in the history of pedagogy and one of the most acclaimed critical educators.

Prefaced by Professor Carlos Alberto Torres, Director of the Paulo Freire Institute, University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), this book calls for reflecting on an important and complex field of educational intervention (learning with adults), along 18 chapters organized into four sections: 1) Contextualising Adult Education; 2) Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives on Adult Education; 3) Contexts of Practice in Adult Education; and 4) Concerns in the Practice of Adult Education.

The first section begins with a discussion around learning and lifelong education. Here the authors present critical questions about the purpose of adult education in the

contemporary era. Specifically, the discussion extends on the neoliberal assumptions about learning throughout life, the notion of state, its role and assumptions, its practices and effects in this field. Arguing that notwithstanding the context of an intensified globalization, the nation state still exists (e.g., the states of the European Union), the authors examine in Chapter 3 the meaning of being a citizen and how the adults' education can contribute to the enhancement of citizenship, even though it is understood as a contested terrain.

The second section is devoted to a discussion of the contemporary theoretical perspectives on adult education. Without attempting to exhaust the possible approaches, the authors address particular aspects of theories of feminism, the human capital theory and the critical systems theory. Three chapters constitute this theoretical section. The first chapter focuses on the Marxist theory, reflecting on how this affects the theories and practices of adult education in different parts of the world (mainly Europe and Latin America). The second chapter – focused on the postmodernist theories – and the third chapter – on adult education and post-colonialism – discuss the direct implications of these perspectives in approaching the structures, identities, the race, and lifelong education.

The third section, *Contexts of Practice*, discusses the various contexts where a lot of teaching and learning is done with adults, whether formally, informally or non-formally. Six chapters discuss topics such as the relations between work and adult education, including the generative forces of employability and the notions of competence and education for work, resulting from a set of radical attempts and reforms created by the neoliberal regimes aiming at maximizing profits and reducing people to mere resources. These chapters also cover other issues related to the role of museums as critical sites of learning in the community, education and social movements (which, according to the authors, are the places where the most critical change is occurring), community development and university continuing education (UCE).

The last section, entitled *Concerns in Practice of Adult Education*, discusses key themes in critical adult education across its six chapters. It addresses women and adult education, using feminist perspectives, critical pedagogy and adult development theory. The remaining chapters question both the purpose and intention in the context of adult education, such as racism, spirituality, environment, adult health education and older adults.

If the 18 chapters of the book (many of them resulting from revised texts, previously published by the authors) reveal to be important for understanding the objectives of the book, the *conclusion* is quite essential to the reader. Here, a holistic vision of the work is presented. In many ways, it is a return to the beginning of the book. It explores the notion of critique and how it has suffered the demise in the field. More than a “traditional conclusion”, this text, subtitled *The Critical Turn in the Adult Education* is a bibliographic essay of sources that highlight the work of many of the proponents of the critical adult education framework and those whose broader work had implications for the field and, furthermore, definitely inspired the authors in the texts presented.

By the end, adult education is presented, according to the authors, as an amorphous field, comprising different traditions and distinctive understandings of who is involved and what their purposes are. All these aspects are somehow covered in the book. Summing up, Leona English and Peter Mayo present a critical perspective on the different political challenges, dilemmas, theories and practices in the field of learning and education of adults, namely those which were intensified by the dynamics of capitalism and neoliberal globalization.

Insofar as brought in by scholars, this work presents a writing style that is most accessible to a wide range of readers, thus contributing, in some way, to restore the hope in “a better world” as a result of the transformative capacity of adult education. Undoubtedly, it is a fundamental book on the analytical, critical and emancipatory perspectives over the adult education. This is a book to read, to reflect and, perhaps, to inspire us to act.

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