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## Knowledge that emerges in-between

By Maja Maksimović

### Introduction

Most educational activities are organised around the transmission of information and theories, either in traditional classrooms or through interactive learning methods. The curriculum is predominantly based on abstract thinking about a world which is separated from the self and the community (Dillon, Bayliss, Stolpe and Bayliss, 2008). With a focus on rigorous educational outcomes, the space for mistakes is often reduced to a minimum. Therefore, previous educational experience of adult learners considerably influences their self-esteem and determines their further participation in adult education, thereby making it far from equal.

As an educationalist and practitioner, I am often confronted with the following question: how can we create educational activities that support learners' self-confidence, which is built through relationships and creative practices? In that sense, a learner would become a *maker* instead of a *knower*. This question involves a paradigmatic shift to knowledge that emerges in-between and through building relationships and invention of new spaces and possibilities. A person is engaged holistically – not solely as *Brain*, but through body and imagination. This requires being open towards a fundamental rethinking of educational theory and practice.

How can we, as adult educators, support co-creation, complexity and collaborative, creative actions as a framework for development and learning? What can adult education learn from art practices? An example of the educational activity based on art will be briefly presented.

### Harmful self-exclusion

McGivney (1993) raises the provocative question of whether the large number of adult education non-participants across Europe is a result of an education that basically remains elitist? The author further states that the main reason for adults not participating enough in adult learning is because the educational activities are mainly designed for the middle class,

thus excluding the majority of the population. Participation in adult education is determined and shaped by the past experiences adults had in formal education, therefore the educational system does not attract a large number of people who do not consider themselves to be good enough (Bulajić and Maksimović, 2011). Adult education can thus too easily fall into the reinforcement of inequalities (Maksimović, 2015).

Since the interest in adult education in the EU grew simultaneously with the objective for Europe to become the most competitive economy, mainstream adult education is reduced to upskilling. The rationale for investments in education of adults became human capital theory, while personal development and well-being became secondary particularly after the economic crisis. The focus is on vocational and accredited education, and activities that are perceived to have a direct contribution to economic prosperity. Such a context maintains the stereotypical view of education as a formal, rigid process, centred on outcomes, examinations and assessment. It is precisely this notion of education that alienates adults who did not succeed in the formal educational system when they were children since they do not want to face yet again the failures and discomfort they felt during their previous learning paths. Due to the current national trends across Europe to set rigorous standards, the autonomy of learners and educators is significantly reduced. An adult can once again feel deprived of independence, responsibility and a sense of control. Although the decline in participation is linked to those with low qualifications and their sense of being educationally deficient, the overwhelming dominance of marks and grades in formal education can create a negative attitude towards continuing education even among highly educated people. The *comparative turn* (Grek, 2009) in international policy-making promotes centralisation of the educational curriculum and a definition of rigorous standards whose achievement is inspected by constant testing. 'The race to improve PISA-rankings has become high a priority in many countries' (Sjøberg, 2015, p. 111) and PISA results have become 'a kind of global 'gold standard' for educational quality' (Sjøberg, 2015, p. 111). The underlying political aim is commitment to a competitive global free market economy. Current discourse in education that is based on the success of the Korean model of education diminishes the autonomy of students and teachers even more. This context can therefore lead to self-exclusion from the process because adults frequently feel ashamed, inadequate, afraid, or simply bored, which fosters neither personal well-being nor social prosperity.



Picture 1: Korean students. (Retrieved from: <https://jdbrownlie.wordpress.com/tag/rok/>)

## Art in education as a way to overcome dualism

Jarvis (2005) sees the root of the problem in Cartesian philosophy in which the mind and body are separate entities. The author points out the weakness of the Cartesian perspective where we exist solely when we think and believes that this idea is the foundation of Western philosophy. In this context, education is defined as the adoption of academic knowledge, which represents a complete, finished product that can be transferred to others. 'In the Cartesian worldview, the mind is the knowing subject, to which certain knowledge belongs' (Tanaka, 2013, p. 49).

Exciting alternatives can be found in arts (in) education activities such as drama or visual arts, where the emphasis is on knowledge that emerges through relationships with other participants, educators, objects, text, colours, etc. The learner is invited to bring his/her experience and explore manifold possibilities of engaging with others. There is no one correct answer, rather a variety of creative responses are welcome. An individual is a maker and the process of knowing and becoming go hand in hand. People bring their own doubts, questions, desires and skills into the room and through interaction with each other or the material, they conquer new spaces of knowing. The person participates holistically: with body and emotions, mind and thinking and s/he is an expert who makes discoveries along the way. Art in education has nevertheless not been sufficiently acknowledged either in formal or informal education for children or for adults. In schools, arts subjects are underrepresented in terms of the number of classes and attention they receive, despite growing evidence of their contribution to personal well-being and self-confidence (Landy, 1982).

The OECD has indeed published research providing evidence for the positive impact of arts. Unfortunately, the emphasis is again on productivity and fostering human capital, rendering the personal welfare achieved through creativity and cooperation at worst irrelevant, at best only an added value:

Most people, including policy-makers, believe that arts education fosters creativity and possibly other skills conducive to innovation. In knowledge-based societies, innovation is a key engine of economic growth, and arts education is increasingly considered as a means to foster the skills and attitudes that innovation requires, beyond and above artistic skills and cultural sensitivity. Does arts education really have positive effects on non-arts skills? (Goldstein and Vincent-Lancrin, 2013, p. 3)

The main principle of using creative methods in education is the orientation to the process and not to the final product. The paradigmatic shift that happened in art from being representational to being engaged and critical, enabled greater connectedness of art and education. Moreover, the 'educational turn' in arts happened when artists began to experiment with process-oriented participatory pedagogical methodologies (Birchall and Sack, 2014). By giving up the defined outcomes and standards, the educator supports the autonomy of the learner and encourages multiplicity of doing and knowing, thus supporting personal initiative and trust in one's own capacities and decisions. For example, if an educator uses drawing or performance making, the accent is not on the aesthetic of the

piece produced by the learner, but on the process and the meaning that a person or a group of people generates.

## Empty space in education – learning to be free

In order to illustrate the outlined ideas, I will give an example of the optional course 'Methods of Civic and Intercultural Adult Education' at the Department for Pedagogy and Andragogy, at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. As an adult educator and university teacher, I wanted to experiment with the notion of outcome orientated vs process orientated learning and to develop a course for students, which did not have either a predetermined curriculum or a set outcomes, or tests and assessments. The main idea was to use the principles of process orientated art and to create a framework in which we can build our relationship and create space for exploration of the topic of civic and intercultural education. My question was related to the possibilities of breaking the division between formal education that exists within academia and those of creative practices, performance and activism. The hypothesis that I started with was that adult education students would develop confidence and self-initiative if they participated in the creation of the curriculum and that, if we negotiate an exam (students had to decide themselves what kind of exam activity would support their learning), and consider it as a project, it would empower students to take responsibility and act as community organisers. There was no clear plan or defined outcomes. I believed that in order to support their future work as educators in the non-formal sector, I had to challenge the pre-constructed assumptions about the learning process as an acquisition of knowledge and defined skills. We wanted to leave the walls of the faculty building and engage with the community – to feel the vibe of the city, map social issues and become familiar with the existing educational initiatives. Since the subject was civic education, I tried to organise learning spaces that would support the development of a civic identity – awareness, freedom, responsibility and initiative. Therefore, we organised conversations with educators, artists, activists and visits to theatres, exhibitions, lectures, etc.



Picture 2: Visit to the community organization Bike Kitchen.

There were also several activities taking place in the classrooms. The students were invited to propose actions and send readings that they found related to the topics. The focus of teaching was on the knowledge co-construction and building of the relationship between teacher and students, and students themselves. The beginning of the course was very challenging for me as a teacher. I felt that I was betraying the teacher role, that I should give them a clear structure and guidelines, precise expectations and exam questions. I noticed that some of them were frustrated by not having clear directions and propositions for the exam. However, our relationship was recognised as a new site of learning and a potential space for emergence of new knowledge and ideas. I believe that the trust we built helped us to stay in the experiment with alternative ways of learning. Students chose to organise an educational activity in the community in the form of an art installation. They raised the issues of space, power and education. I saw the course not as a final product, but more as an impulse for further transformation and engagement.



Picture 3: Conversations about the play RED – *Suicide of the nation*.

After the exam was finished, the students were asked to write a reflection and contemplate on the idea of *emergent curriculum* (Osberg and Biesta, 2008). They wrote about the course, but also the exam that they had chosen and organised. Their voices gave me insight into the difficulties and resistance they experienced, but also about the power and influence that it had on their professional identity and well-being.

At the beginning of the course most of them felt frustrated at the lack of defined expectations, but emphasised that it was precisely this that contributed to their learning. Most of the students explained that they did not have autonomy during their formal education, which made them uncomfortable when they faced a kind of learning empty space (Brook, 1996).

*'The initially undefined curriculum pushed us from the comfort zone and caused frustration: How should we respond, what was expected from us. After I realised that we were free to decide how we would learn and we did not know what to do with that. During our schooling we have always known what was expected of us and our only duty was to respond adequately.'*

*'On the one hand I see this as a very positive thing, but at times this was a problem. Probably because throughout our schooling we were not accustomed to having so much freedom and sometimes it was difficult to focus. But I think we overcame that and learned much more than if the curriculum was defined.'*

*'I am grateful for not having specific directions, because I opened myself to some important questions and dilemmas about myself and other people. I felt how hard it is to get out of the comfort zone and experience freedom: freedom frustrates; freedom does not set boundaries and directions; freedom makes one think, act and initiate. To have freedom means you can finally do what you want. Then you finally ask yourself questions what you want, what you can, for what you are willing to take responsibility and to act ....'*

The important aspect of the course was the exam. The students perceived the fact that they could decide on the topic and type of exam as empowering and engaging. Organisation of an activity within the community shaped their identity of active citizens and influenced their view on adult education as a tool for social cohesion. Moreover, since the focus was on group achievement rather than personal achievement, some of them pointed out that collaboration was challenging, but that it increased their trust in the group process:

*'We realised that there are a lot of things we could do and that our city is not immutable, that our role as a citizen is not passive, that we as adult educators have a lot of opportunities, we have confirmed the idea that learning takes place everywhere, that our life is our business and therefore we must 'take matters into our own hands', because nobody else will do it for us.'*

*'After the exam we are motivated to jointly organise something in the future.'*

*'This exam united us and helped to see how something good may arise from a variety of opinions.'*

*'It put me in a position that required intensive cooperation with other colleagues and I learned a lot from that situation. I was impressed by the exam and I will certainly remember it, because unlike the other exams (which I usually forget), I feel like I've really done something important.'*



Picture 4: Student Installation about space.



Picture 5: Activities during the exam.

Although frustrating at the beginning, the lack of structure contributed to the development of students' self-esteem. It is not the kind of confidence that is equal to being successful in a society as it is usually understood. Personal well-being is contextualised and to a great extent depends on the social and political system and dominant ideologies reflected in local communities. In this respect self-confidence includes critical thinking, trust in one's own judgments and decisions, and readiness to influence and change society. Education that supports this must have freedom and equality as a main value; teachers must be urged

to stop looking for right answers. Students underlined that being given autonomy had a positive influence on their self-esteem:

*'Participation in this course confirmed to me that in the future I want to create activities that will encourage local communities to act.'*

*'I surprised myself, noticing how creative I can be if I have a chance to.'*

*'It's okay to dare to be different, to act in a different way and to think differently – in a way that is neither correct nor wrong, just ours.'*

*'During the course, and certainly after the exam, I felt more confident. I spoke with others and they said the same. I do not really know exactly what to call it, but I see that together we can do something.'*

In adult education practice it is generally believed that in order to motivate learners and support their self-esteem, educational activities have to be pleasant and encouraging. In the students' responses it can be noticed that learning which supports self-confidence does not have to be a joyful and easy experience. It is about the freedom that can grow in a relationship, built on the premises of trust and equality, which ultimately fosters the learners' autonomy. We can frequently be frustrated with freedom and the sense that we do not know what our options are and what criteria we have to satisfy in order to be successful. The case studies provided in this article, however, are a crucial reminder that the key for criticality and growth does not lie in being right, but in exposing oneself to the risk of being wrong.



Picture 5: Generation 2015.

## Author

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