Learning with Adults: The Role of Practice in the Formation of Adults

Peter Mayo
Department of Education Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Malta

Practice has for a long time been an important feature of adult learning and the debates centering around this field. It is common to attach importance to this aspect of an adult's learning and life trajectory in evaluations of university programmes focusing specifically on adults. The emphasis here is on engaging the adults' life experiences. This is based on the belief, following Freire, that the starting points of effective learning are the learners' concrete existential situations. With this view in mind, different sites of practice (family, work, communal etc.) are regarded as important sites of learning.

Furthermore there has been a long series of debates around ways and means of evaluating and validating practice, especially in the area of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). Validation packages have also been the outcomes of projects for this purpose. A lot of adult education takes the form of attempts to learn to be able to tackle immediate goals, both individual and communal. Hence relevance becomes an important feature. By relevance one means a strong connection between learning and life.

Practice and praxis

And yet fields of practice, though capable of generating different forms of learning and different insights, captured in the commonplace phrase, or (should I say?) the rather outworn cliché, the 'University of Life,' are also said to have their limits. This has been argued with regard to schools where learning from the 'drift of life,' though necessary as a potential starting point, is often deemed not sufficient in itself to provide the kind of knowledge necessary to partake fully of what life itself can offer

(Young and Muller, 2010). Seizing upon aspects of life as an 'occasional motive' (Martinelli, 2007) is just a conduit that gradually takes the learners into the heart of those disciplines containing knowledge that is 'really useful' (a contentious term that raises the issue: who decides what is useful?) in the outside world. The intention is to take learners to that higher level, to 'take … students beyond their experience and enable them to envisage alternatives that have some basis in the real world' (Young 2013: 107). It is argued by some that this is what justifies the effort of attending a school, no matter how unorthodox it is in its overall approach (think Barbiana and Lorenzo Milani – Batini *et al*, 2014) rather than simply learning from life itself.

One might argue, along the same lines, that we need institutions that allow us to take steps forward and which provide knowledge that, though ideally having their basis in the real world, cannot be learnt simply from everyday life without some professional or significant intervention by teachers and others, including peers. Adults are said to have a broader range of experiences than children which hence provide further reasons why their experience must be engaged (although I contend that this should be a feature of education at all levels). This is where the old Socratic maxim, as reported by Plato in the *Apologia*, gains importance: an unexamined life is a life not worth living. Practice on its own, without suitable conditions and stimulae for reflection and examination, besides imaginative elaboration of thought, does not necessarily 'make perfect.' In Freire's view, action without reflection is mere activism. What really 'makes perfect', or more appropriately takes us forward, in the views of many (notably Iram Siraj Blatchford, 1994), is Praxis.

Praxis (Brookfield, 2005) is not to be confused with *practice* but involves reflection upon action for transformative change. Freire adopted praxis as his central philosophical and pedagogical concept (Gadotti, 1998). It is the key pedagogical vehicle for the 'coming into critical consciousness' or '*conscientização*'. This is the means whereby one can stand back from the everyday world of action to perceive this world in a more critical light. It is the sort of approach from Freire which another critical pedagogue, Ira Shor, calls 'Extraordinarily Re-experiencing the Ordinary' (Shor, 1987: 93). Educators and learners need to start from their existential situation.

They then engage critically through praxis, the obtaining of critical distance, to uncover the underlying contradictions of one's reading of the world, history, specific situations etc. The stimulae for this can be various an extraordinary experience, critical questions posed by educators, a codification of aspects of this experience in the form of representative photography, a drawing, a play or a documentary (Freire, 1973). Whichever medium is used or experience is called into question, it must have the potential to allow persons to stand back from the world they know to view it in a different light, the kind of light that allows for what Mezirow would call a 'perspective transformation.' (Mezirow, 1978)   There would be potential here, without any guarantees, for a person to develop a more coherent and therefore critical view of things.

Unfortunately the humdrum and pressures of life often deny time and space for praxis be provided. Some people manage on their own to carve out such spaces. For instance there is a discussion in Freire and Faundez (1989) where two persons, from Latin America, in exile in Switzerland, regard exile itself as a form of praxis, a way of reviewing their respective country (Brazil and Chile) from afar, drawing on their past experiences and recently received information, to begin to see it in a different light.

Some stumble into such spaces. Revealing here are accounts by political activists who experienced imprisonment and found that space for critical reflection in prisons, often abetted by like-minded prisoners of conscience etc. who serve as co-learners and as persons in dialogue with whom to bounce off and confront ideas. The cases of Gramsci, Luxemburg, Mandela, and Castro, all taken away from their 'world of practice and action' and secluded either for short or long periods, come to mind. These situations that enabled some critical reflection on practice through forced 'standing back' or obtaining 'critical distance', the criticality possibly being enhanced by contact with other political prisoners in the yard or corridors (as with Gramsci), led to ruminations that are expressed in a number of publications (Gramsci, 1971, Mandela, 1995).

Others require assistance in this regard, even if, with some, such as those just mentioned, this assistance is of the merest kind. It is however sufficient enough to spark off reflection. Specific organized prison education attempts have been documented, e.g. prison education, as with Castro, Gramsci, Irish political prisoners inside the Maze, and Palestinians inside Ansar III (Sacco, 2001) etc. Other forms of prison education are organized among inmates of different types in an area which has been growing rapidly in Europe, for instance (http://www.epea.org/). Then there are the various forms of non-formal learning worldwide that provide such stimulus for a variety of purposes literacy acquisition, health education, cooperative development, consumer awareness, etc. These popular education settings have been the subject of much research in adult education (La Belle, 1986; Torres, 1990, Kane, 2001) and are said to give importance to flexibility and relevance; codifications of experience for critical distance, as in Freire, etc but which focus primarily and as a starting point on the field of everyday life, of practical life activities. The educators involved are said to teach as well as facilitate learning bringing in 'hinge themes' (Freire, 1973) that can stimulate one's imagination and critical acumen to be able to see beyond commonplace views of reality.

In addition, the 'significant other' can be a peer or group of peers with whom the person engages in debate or co-investigates an object of inquiry. Children have often been organized into groups of peer tutoring as with the Montessori approach or the approach adopted by don Lorenzo Milani at his school at Barbiana (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996; Batini *et al,* 2014). This represents a tradition that goes back to at least the 18th century school of John Lancaster in England. Adults can furthermore be organized within non-formal learning settings in peer tutoring groups or may voluntarily or unwittingly find themselves in one, examples of the former being the Swedish study circles and of the latter being groups of pensioners meeting in a particular club or pub on a Saturday afternoon or other time of day. Among both sets of peer tutoring groups one finds for instance communal clubs where guardians can congregate to chat with one another on, say, the processes of rearing the children in their care. This can happen in an organized way within community centres developed for this purpose and other purposes. They can also meet informally, say in public

laundries, where experiences are shared. Dialogue and exchange can help stimulate changes in practice and generate a 'perspective transformation.' The foregoing are various possibilities for one to reflect on and share experiences of practice with others, often more experienced others in a situation with the potential to constitute what Vygotsky calls 'zones of proximal development.'

An idea which has been floated around for several years and put into practice in a number of countries, as well as being written about in the adult education literature, is that of the workplace being turned into a learning organization (Fenwick, 2008) where experiences are shared. This has been in keeping with the much celebrated concept of total quality management (TQM). This concept has been embraced by many, including unions, who want to maintain on the agenda the issue of workers' participation. The concept has, however, also been viewed with suspicion in terms of suiting management's interests since it renders workers more 'loyal' to the firm through having a limited sense of ownership of it. The more interesting forms of this kind of engagement with the sharing of practices at the workplace could be found in some of the most radicalized forms of self-management or cooperative development, where the sharing of practice and the learning accruing from it is carried out within the process of what some would call a critical engagement with the world of work. In short, the attempt is more radical in that involves not only ways of carrying out production more efficiently but also, and primarily, entails engaging critically with the process of production itself and the different social relations it entails, with a view to transforming it. More radically, it can also involve questioning the nature of production itself (Milani, 2002). The greater the degree of worker control, the greater the chances for this type of engagement with practice to occur. The chances of its being allowed to occur unobtrusively in traditional capitalist enterprises are very remote.

One other site of practice which also involved learning of the formal and nonformal, and possibly even incidental type, is that provided within social movements (Welton, 1993; Hall and Clover, 2006). Learning through practice can be acquired informally as when people participate in an action for change or to offer resistance to forces that

pose a threat to the citizens' lifeworld/s (Foley, 1999). Movements can also provide direct learning experiences, such those involving the acquisition of competences to provide alternative forms of social practice. The old labour unions provided forms of training meant to improve practice in such fields as negotiation of employment conditions, bargaining over wages etc. There are those who would argue that social movement learning can also occur incidentally. People learn from each other when engaging in collective action, as with the Arab uprisings where people learnt from others and exchanged ideas regarding how best to go about their practice to pose a serious threat to corrupt government regimes. What we have here is the collective dimension of learning with regard to improving living conditions. It is all about learning through collective engagement in particular struggles. It is common to come across situations when organisations belonging to social movements hold workshops to make theoretical sense out of the practice in which they are engaged. This was the case with activities organised by the academy of the green party in Vienna in which a colleague and I were involved. It centred on making theoretical sense of various activists' engagement in protests and other activities in relation to the neoliberalisation of the University, a series of actions under the title of Unibrennt (University burns), (Mayo, 2012). Other movements entail learning from particular situations concerning creative practices with respect to consumption, production and citizens' organisation. These practices fall under the umbrella term of 'social creation' (De Vita and Piussi, 2013)

Finally, a word of note with regard to organizations involved in practice in the social domain, especially NGOs involving voluntary workers. It is not uncommon to experience situations characterized by rifts between theoreticians and actual practitioners, the latter complaining of the existence of ivory towers in which theorists and researchers are cut off from 'the trenches' so to speak, while the former often engage in patronizing attitudes towards the latter who are sweepingly dismissed as people who act with 'good intentions' but who play into the hands of the authorities with their actions owing to their failure to 'understand' the nature of the structuring forces at play. This often leads to an unhealthy dichotomy characterized by lack of mutual respect and lack of recognition that different useful knowledge/s and insights

emerge from different sources including the practice engaged in by the voluntary workers themselves.

English (2005: 503) writes of the theory-practice divide in this context but, also draws on a concept by Homi Bhabha with regard to the cultural studies area. She adopts the notion of 'third space' practitioners to refer to those in-between spaces or marginal places in which there is a fluid movement between roles of adult educator, researcher, practitioner or theorist. Many adult educators often combine such roles either wittingly or unwittingly. This allows scope for both sectors to work together and learn from each other. Both parties involved can gain access to different kinds of resources: those that traditionally belong to the academy and those arising from or strongly connected with the field of practice itself.

References

Batini, F, Mayo, P and Surian, A (2014), *Lorenzo Milani, the School of Barbiana and the Struggle for Social Justice*, New York: Peter Lang.

Brookfield, S.D (2005) 'Praxis' in L.English (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Adult Education,* Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.

De Vita, A and Piussi, A. M. (2013) *Learning with Adults. A Reader*, Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense.

English, L (2005) 'Practitioner' in L.English (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Adult Education,* Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.

English, L and Mayo, P (2012) *Learning with Adults. A Critical Pedagogical Introduction*, Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense.

Fenwick, T 92008) 'Workplace learning: Emerging trends and new perspectives', *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Volume 2008, Issue 119, pages 17–26

Freire, P (1973) *Education for Critical Consciousness*, New York and London: Continuum.

Freire, P and Faundez, A (1989) *Learning to Question. A Pedagogy of Liberation*, Geneva: World Council of Churches.

Foley, G. (1999). *Learning in social action. A contribution to understanding informal education.* London and New York: Zed Books.

Gadotti M (1996) *Pedagogy of Praxis: A Dialectical Philosophy of Education*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Gramsci A (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* Edited by Q Hoare and G Nowell Smith. New York, NY: International Publishers.

Hall, B.L., and Clover, D.E.(2006). Social movement learning. In R. Veira de Castro, A.V. Sancho, and P. Guimarães (Eds.), *Adult education. New routes in a new landscape* Braga: University of Minho.

Kane L (2001) *Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America*. London: Latin American Bureau.

La Belle TJ (1986) *Non-Formal Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: Stability, Reform or Revolution?* New York, NY: Praeger.

Mandela, N (1995) *Long Road to Freedom. The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, London: Abacus.

Mayo, P (2012) *Politics of Indignation. Imperialism, Postcolonial Disruptions and Social Change*, Winchester; Zero Books.

Martinelli, E (2007) *Don Lorenzo Milani. Dal Motivo Occasionale al Motivo Profondo*, Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina.

Mezirow, J (1978) 'Perspective Transformation' *Adult Education Quarterly 28* (2), 100-110

Milani, B (2002), From Opposition to Alternatives. Postindustrial Potentials and Transformative Learning. In E. O'Sullivan, A. Morrell and M.A. O'Connor (Eds.), *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning. Essays on Theory and Praxis*, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave

Sacco, J (2002). *Palestine,* Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books

Scuola di Barbiana. (1996). *Lettera a una Professoressa* (*Letter to a teacher*). Florence: Libreria Editrice Fiorentina.

Shor I (1987) *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life.* Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press.

Siraj-Blatchford, I (1994) *Praxis makes Perfect. Critical Educational Research for Social Justice* Derbyshire: Education Now Publishing Co-operative Ltd

Torres, C.A. (1990). *The politics of nonformal education in Latin America.* New York: Praeger.

Torres, C. A (2013) *Political Sociology of Adult Education*, Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense.

Welton, M. (1993b). Social revolutionary learning: The new social movements as learning sites. *Adult Education Quarterly, 43*(3), 152-164.

Young M (2013) Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: a knowledge-based approach. *Journal of Curriculum Studies 45*(2): 101–118.

Young M and Muller J (2010) Three educational scenarios for the future: lessons from the sociology of knowledge. *European Journal of Education*, *45*(1): 11–27.