

Revitalising Adult Continuing Education for Positive Social Changes and Personal Fulfilment

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Introduction

Welcome to this special issue of Lifelong Lifewide Learning on the theme revitalizing continuing adult education to promote positive social change and personal fulfillment. This theme reflects several debatable—but not necessarily faulty—assumptions. First, “revitalizing” suggests that the vitality of our field—“Adult and Continuing Education (ACE)/Adult Learning and Education (ALE)” for convenience—has suffered a demonstrable decline that needs to be reversed. A Google search for the meaning of “revitalize” produces definitions such as:

- Embue something with new life and vitality
- To make something active, healthy or energetic again
- To give new life, energy, activity, or success.

Historians of the field might indeed be able to document different eras or epochs when ACE/ALE was much more “alive, healthy and energetic” than it is today. But such an analysis would also require a clear understanding of the defining characteristics of the field and how these have been affected over time by key contextual factors such as the fields’ prominence—or not—in key policy discourses, societal recognition and financial support, and appreciation of the outcomes/impacts of our work.

This leads to a second assumption—that continuing adult education, adult learning and education, or “the field” by any other name(s), has a coherent-enough identity that we all understand what it is, more or less, that we wish to *revitalize*. Much like the well-known parable of the “six blind men and the elephant,” we each understand what the field is through our own knowledge of the parts with which we are most familiar. Our ability to clearly articulate what “the field” is and what its contributions to society are—and can be—has always been a challenge because “the field” has no clearly defined boundaries, lacks a wide and deep knowledge base, agreed upon values, and widely-accepted standards for preparing practitioners. Recent efforts to address some of these challenges have taken the form of the “We Are ALE” initiative, now hosted by the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), and “Curriculum GlobALE”, developed and hosted by the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE) and DVV International. Although laudable, even these substantial efforts to form a more coherent and consistent identity for “the field” and to provide a framework for basic professional preparation have limitations due to the rather vague boundaries of the field and diverse contexts of practice.

The theme of this issue speaks specifically to the *social change and personal fulfillment* purposes of the field. The implicit assumption in naming these two purposes is that they have not received the attention they deserve, and this lack of attention may be one reason

the field has lost some of its vitality. Narrowing the call for contributions to these two important purposes was quite deliberate and a bit risky. It was a deliberate invitation to engage with two important purposes that are neglected within current discourses on lifelong learning that frequently emphasize preparing adults to assume instrumental roles in a globalized economy...an emphasis that is often criticized as insensitive to the more humanistic and transformative foci that have historically been key aspects of the field. It was risky because promoting transformative learning in the face of inequality and injustice threatens established hierarchies and power relations, so it is not welcomed by those deeply invested in maintaining the status quo. Souring public attitudes toward migration and migrants and restricting efforts to promote equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are evidence of resistance to social change its consequences.

One other dimension of the call for contributions to this issue must be mentioned, and that is the hope expressed that many of these papers would provide the basis for transnational/trans-atlantic cooperation. It is very easy for our worklife to be fully consumed by the requirements of our jobs and our personal academic and professional interests. It takes additional effort, often over an extended period of time, to form trusting, sustainable relationships that are necessary to conduct projects across political, linguistic and cultural boundaries. The conference, hosted by the University of Florence and the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame in Florence, Italy on 7-9 November, 2024, was purposefully designed to promote relationship building and nurture cooperative projects. Unlike most academic conferences, the design was not an assembly of research presentations, but rather was organized around ten working groups charged with the task—through several hours of substantive discussions—of “co-creating new partnerships and projects.” Summary reports were presented by each of the working groups in the hope that they would continue their discussions following the conference and develop feasible projects that contribute to revitalizing the field to better serve adult learners globally. For those interested, the final conference program with details about the working groups can be found at this link (<https://www.hoflorence.unifi.it/upload/sub/programma.pdf>)

In this issue of the journal you will find 50 papers on a wide range of topics that reflect the diverse interests and perspectives that characterize the field. The papers are organized into three broad groupings: theory, research, and experiences. As you read these contributions, I urge you to reflect on the theme of the special issue and of the Florence conference and consider the following related questions:

- How does this paper advance our understanding of an important aspect of the field?
- In what way might this paper—or the line of work it is drawn from—contribute to revitalizing/strengthening the field?
- What potential does this paper have to promote positive social change and/or personal fulfillment?
- What form(s) of collaboration or cooperation might be developed to expand work in this area?

Thanks to all those who contributed their work to this issue, to those who reviewed the submissions, and to those responsible for challenging us to play a more active role in revitalizing the field of ACE/ALE.

Thematic frame of the essays

Adult continuing education (ACE) refers to the wide range of educational programmes and learning opportunities specifically designed for adults who seek to enhance their skills, knowledge, and personal growth throughout their lives. The adult continuing education field encompasses various theoretical approaches, epistemological frames, items, topics, issues. Their significance has grown and gained relevance due to the economic, social, geo-political evolution and changes, war included. ACE research and practices are not only needed for career advancement, professional mobility but it is much more important to fight against “learning warfare” (Federighi, 2023) and promote self-directed learning processes control (Federighi, Torlone, De Maria, 2024; Torlone & Ishchenko, 2024). This is also something that comes out of the collection of papers published in this Issue.

The Issue is divided into three sections: (i) theoretical articles. (ii) researches. (iii) experiences. They all deepen ACE aspects. Although not exhaustive they provide a wide spectrum of ACE fields of study and future challenges for education research. They all deal with ACE *approaches, paradigms, constructs, fields of ACE action* as well as *learning methods* and *distance platforms*.

ACE approaches, paradigms, constructs

ACE approaches connected to *equity in providing access* to education good and services remains one of the key challenges for the public ACE system and the less answered so far. Some are discussed in the Issue.

This is the case for micro-credentials and individual learning accounts. They are presented by Farkas as policy measures promoting demand-side adult education that are useful to address barriers to participation. The critical analysis stresses the relevance and the limitations of them, if connected to the quality of the learning opportunities and the real learning outcomes achieved (or not) by learners.

This is much more pivotal when in relation to migration phenomena and the related services that higher education (Vittori & Tarozzi) and adult instruction services (the Italian CPIAs) are able to provide (Pizzolato; Gabrielli, Sposetti & Szpunar). The political dimension of the issue is about how to guarantee migrant people that the certifications and qualifications they achieved in their home countries are recognised in the hosting country, with no distinction as to length, productive sector, typology of certification (Lapov; Iannone).

The distributive equity also implies for public policies and research to devote attention to new ACE targets. Seniors, elderly are treated as a challenging priority by Franceschelli also considering demographic trends. Welfare, employment, ACE and active ageing policies do necessarily need to be defined and implemented in a vertical and horizontal subsidiarity. Thus actors devoted to the policies and measures innovation as well as

implementation have to closely work together and cooperate to answer to question like the following: Do elderly people need to learn? Do public policies design ad hoc measures and incentives for individuals and organisations? Do private workplaces arrange appropriate measures to take benefit from the knowledge and experience -in a wide sense- of senior professionals (at all levels)?

Active ageing is an interdisciplinary research field, also dealing with cognitive dimension of learning.

Palmieri, Balzotti look at elderly in their article and the appropriate learning methods that suit them the best. They reflect on the “Montessori Assessment System” to design educational services addressed to old people affected by dementia.

Employability emerges as an ACE construct that brings together any people searching for his/her own professional development, no matter the age. This is much more relevant considering the numerous and different transitions people encounter when searching for a job. Formenti, Greggio, Galimberti, Castiglioni provide a theoretical description of the employability construct looking at graduates whilst Galeotti, Boffo, Togni analyse “employability” as a process supporting transitions in the labour markets. A different perspective is provided by De Simone as her analysis relates to the mindfulness being an educational practice that may support employability of higher education students in educational sciences.

Learning ecosystems paradigm may help in defining the role each member of the ACE system can play. Cooperation among the whole set of public, private, not-for-profit actors in ACE regional and local policies is strategic. It needs to be reinforced to ensure impact and sustainability of policies, measures, initiatives that are being experimented in local settings in Europe. Furthermore cooperation is useful to create new policies, measures, initiatives. Regional and local governments, social partners, third sector organisations, businesses, trade unions can work in a renewed setting where clusters of organisations, institutions and projects on a local level are promoted to include the excluded ACE public (Porter, 1998, 2000). The essay by Biagi, Del Gobbo & De Maria is figured in this conceptual frame applied to the research in the local territory of Casentino (Tuscany, Italy) aimed at recovery and valorisation of cultural heritage through the cooperation among local public institutions, associations, businesses, schools.

ACE fields of action for policies, education research and practices

The lack of an adequately qualified ALE workforce constitutes a problem at all levels of education. Literature is extensive (i.e. Torlone et al., 2023) and proved by the number of papers collected in the issue dealing with professionalisation of school teachers as in De Sanctis & Bianchi; Sicurello; D’Amico; Tammaro & Gragnaniello; Spada, Mignosi & Accurso. The same affects teachers in VET (Di Rienzo, De Blasis & Serra). Professionalism and recognition of ACE practitioners’ role are considered as meaningful as the issue of funding. They are all relevant questions affecting the quality of the ACE provision and the quality of the learners real learning outcomes. Elements to be taken into account for both

policies and research are ALE incoming recruitment as this is often not based on the assessment of the possession of specialised theoretical and practical skills that are required by the complexity of the professions in ACE. Such complexity must be related to the contents of these professions being the interpretation, design, management, and evaluation of the educational and learning processes of a wide variety of populations, organisations, communities and for a wide range of everchanging issues. In addition, ACE professionals must deal with new challenges in terms of content and methods (e.g., the digital transition, Artificial Intelligence). Some also require ethics preparation as in Vignando.

The complexity is also related to the wide variety of productive and service settings ACE workforce can be employed, prison (Basilisco), cultural infrastructures (Marconi), volunteering (Capo; Spinelli) included.

Learning methods in ACE

The range of methods currently employed by educational research at all stages is wide (Cohen et al., 2007). Papers in the Issue covers some starting from the biographies (Dominicé, 2007, 2000, 1990). These latter ones have been investigated in the years (i.e. Alheit, 1994, 1992; Alheit et al., 1995; Demetrio, 1996; Pineau, 1980; Plummer, 1983). Nowadays biography research and use in educational research is wide. This is what is discussed in the essay by Benelli, Broglia and the one by Azzollini, Baldassarre. What educational research should continue to investigate in order to provide paths for action concerns the meaning and use of the tool that can be generated from biographies for the purpose of individual and professional development, including in work contexts.

Supervision (Femminini, Salerni, Stanzione), observation, and feedback emerge as additional methods useful to professionals for building actions and pathways for professional development and growth in the workplace.

Distance learning platform and Artificial Intelligence

Distance learning is undoubtedly a field of work where innovation and future developments need to be better investigated by research in ACE. This implies adequate policies that are grounded by solid research. This combination of educational research that informs policy is essential, both due to the pervasiveness of all kinds of IT tools in people's educational and learning processes, and because of the explosion of technologies that are accessible to everyone. Moreover informal learning is highly affected by how these devices are being used by individuals and the correlated learning outcomes that individuals achieve (not always intentionally) when using them for learning (ie MOOC) and for any other kind of use (ie online purchases of good and services). As long as individuals acquire control on how and what they are learning while using these devices they may acquire the capacity to act as conscious "consumers".

Distance learning platform is the object of analysis in the paper by Klotz, Pallai, Erdei. They describe the platform in use in Hungary for the civil service continuing education system.

Artificial intelligence is used for training purposes when it affects training of higher education teachers (Pattoia).

Moreover Artificial Intelligence poses ethical matters when using it, for whatever training is being exploited. Additional related issues are relevant and not covered by this Issue (i.e. socio-linguistic, semantic, technical questions just to mention some).

But mostly learning platforms and artificial intelligence devices raise an urgent issue in research, practices as well as policies, that is hardly embedded in the definition of “adult learner”. “Adult learner” definition vary according to the andragogical cultures researchers refer to. Based upon the adult transformative and emancipatory adult education tradition, we intend “adult learner” as any person who is able to use education and training with the aim to transform his/her own conditions of living and working and can act on the transformation processes of ACE itself (Federighi, 2018). When using platforms and artificial intelligence, adults must be in the condition to exercise the power to control positive and negative “learning valencies” (De Sanctis, 1975) induced by them and react in order to safeguard one’s own intellectual development (in the wide sense) (Bélanger, Nuissl, Torlone, 2024).

As long as powers of choice, control, reaction are all protected, democracy and freedom in education are qualified. Artificial intelligence and democracy is the topic Cera analyses.

Concluding reflections

ACE remains a wide field of research and work. This is also due to the increasing ACE provision all over the world: strategies, policies, activities, contents, professionals, methods and tools are interconnected and still deserve deep reflections and innovative contributions by adult education research. This is needed both to ensure the quality of ACE and the real learning outcomes achieved by adults as well as to promote equity in access ACE of quality. Data show that ACE is becoming an “elitist” service addressed to high-skilled people much more than low skilled and low qualified: 65.7 % of those with tertiary education participated in formal or non-formal learning activities in 2022, while only 25.1 % of those with a low level of education participated (Eurostat, 2022). The ones who may need ACE more are the ones having less. Their education is left to informal and embedded processes in personal and professional life and their educational quality.

Challenges in ACE innovation are unique. Nowadays they pose research in ACE in front of the need to produce innovation in theoretical frames that can help in rebuilding democratic foundations of our communities.

This Issue wants to devote attention to the status of the research and practice in some ACE fields. These were also discussed in the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of fame Conference and in each of the ten Working Groups that were held in Florence (November 2024, 7-9) that are producing discussion and debate for further development.

We wish readers will get hints and inspirations for new ACE theoretical approaches and devices that might help in forming “The Public” (Dewey, 1927) meant as the collective subject possessing and practicing the power of transformation and emancipation.

Authors' Note

- (1) The Editorial of the issue is the result of the fruitful and regular collaboration between the Authors. Only for scientific responsibility, the Authors declare that Thomas Sork is the writer of § 1 "Introduction", Francesca Torlone is the writer of § 2 "Thematic frame of the essays" and Giovanna Del Gobbo is the writer of § 3 "Concluding reflections".

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