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## **Adult Education and The Scientific Community**

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**Abstract: In this paper, we analyzed the recent developments of the AE Scientific Community in Spain. Particularly, we focus in which factors have made possible to overcome its isolated initial situation towards a high quality one. Finally, we identified current works and future trends in order to characterized its main aspects such as its dialogic approach as a result of their interdisciplinary and interinstitutional efforts.**

### **Introduction**

In the mid nineties we were arguing that adult education was left to a marginal position in relation to other knowledge fields and was not taken into account in the international scientific community. In the general field of education and the social sciences few people knew about the work of adult educators who were getting closed in a ghetto in the academia. Moreover, by not contributing to the scientific community, we fostered the marginalization of adult education from educational policies and society. Thus, we argued that need adult educators had to get "out of the ghetto" (Flecha, 1995).

The lack of dialogue among different scientific communities has provoked on the one hand, that AE researchers have confined within themselves, creating their own ghetto; and, on the other, the rest of the scientific educational and social sciences community will ignore systematically the scientific productions in the field. In doing so, research in AE was reduced to the limits of the discipline. Their contributions were only relevant for those who were the producers. Consequently, final results were only known among AE departments and research centers, but, only in very few occasions they were outreaching outside its own boundaries. Even AE importance increases, it is necessarily to add that there were only a few who were interested in research findings in adult development or adult learning processes.

This isolation, apart from making weaker the community in comparison to the rest of them, has also led not to take advantage of the possibility of conducting high quality research. This disconnection has greatly damaged to the Adult Education field, in the sense that it has not been recognized from the administration or by the general educational system.

In this paper we will focus on those aspects which have allowed overcoming this isolation by partaking in the wider scientific debate in equal basis. As well as, those factors that have made it become a framework of reference more and more important for educational and social sciences. Let's analyze which aspects from the Scientific Community made it turn into a ghetto.

### **AE Scientific Community: An Isolated Ghetto in the Margins**

The lack of relation with other disciplines has been one of the main barriers for the community to develop itself. It has represented a significant imbalance in the intellectual and scientific debate in AE. For example, the latest advancements in Social Sciences were considered in the discipline later on their appearance. Consequently, for a long time, administration and other agencies have not trusted those studies or projects carried on by AE specialists. In Spain, the AE scientific community has successfully inverted this situation.

By ignoring latest developments in Social Sciences not only its own scientific production was illegitimate but also it reduced its credibility. It makes adult education field to have a very important humanitarian component but without intellectuals and scientific one.

Finally, another aspect worth to remark has been the entrance of other discipline experts who do not have a specific knowledge of the field. This has provoked that very often those findings from other disciplines have been applied automatically in AE, by ignoring specifics of adult education population and their own learning process. For example, theories of reading skills acquisition for children have been applied to the adult literacy process.

At the moment, we can see interaction with other scientific communities and with the most important authors in Social Sciences, working interdisciplinary and inter-institutionally, and contributions to the adult education which have been demonstrated as successful. All of them have been factors that have been crucial to overcome the initial situation.

### **Development of a Theoretical Framework Based in the Most Important Social Theories and the Latest Findings in Educational and Social Sciences**

The Scientific Community participation in relevant debates has allowed to, on the one side, integrate into our own analysis and discourses key theoretical contributions; and on the other side, contribute to it by including own findings from AE research. In this way, apart from disseminating specific findings of the field, it has been possible to establish an egalitarian cooperation with the rest of scientific communities.

In this sense, it is worth to remark the fluid dialogue that the Spanish scientific community has with the most representative social sciences theorists. Spanish researches maintain a constant debate about their works with authors such as Beck, Castells, Habermas and Touraine. In these dialogues, different topics are analyzed from significant changes in society to the current dialogic turn.

The AE scientific community has followed up Castells' works from the late 80's. In doing so, we have been the pioneers in reflecting about how education is reconfigured within the new

information society, acquiring special relevance. This reflection was done even before of the most important authors in social sciences. In this sense, those works from AE represent one of the referential points in the field.

Furthermore, the AE scientific community has been the first one in introducing the communicative orientation in Social Sciences in Spain. The dialogue maintained with thinkers as Habermas or Beck has allowed them to overcome the structuralism and poststructuralist conceptions that have prevalence until the late nineties. The dialogic dimension in AE altogether with the dual conception has brought one of the most rigorous analyses in social sciences; it has led to the configuration of a theoretical framework, which explains the transformation capacity of all the actors through the dialogue. In this way, AE has been considered from being only an educational practice with a strong social component to be one of the educational spaces with a strong and founded theoretical framework.

At the moment, the AE scientific community leaders most of the theoretical debates produced in the Social and Educational Sciences domains in Spain due to its theoretical background and international recognition.

### **Interdisciplinary and Interinstitutional Work: Towards an Open and Social Scientific Community**

At the moment, its interdisciplinary and interinstitutional work characterize the Spanish scientific community. All the analysis part from the confluence of economy, sociology, psychology, anthropology and pedagogy. In fact, most part of its members belongs to any of these disciplines. The interrelation of different approaches and frameworks favor a kind of more global research, able to capture the complexity of the phenomenon as well as to offer integral answers of it.

On the other side, interactions with the scientific community are not limited to them; it also includes a close cooperation with other institutions and civil organizations. For example, the Pedagogical renewal movement in AE (REDA) and the participants movement (CON-FAPEA) have a very active role in defending a democratic and participate model of education. The Scientific Community cooperates with both sectors in order to consolidate this model with high quality research standards at the service of society.

The concept of "operture" is crucial in order to fully understand this process which, as we can see, is composed by two different dimensions: operture inwards and outwards scientific community- we can say that there are two dimensions: internal and external.

Internally, an open scientific community is a community, which has not separated, and mutually isolated domains around professors who do not want share their own knowledge. Then, they lose the opportunity to contrast their findings and create a generative debate. The openness within the scientific community helps, consequently to the scientists to validate their theories and findings. It is demonstrated that from the exchange of ideas and materials the most likely outcome will be higher quality products.

Externally, the concept of aperture defines the relationship between scientific community and the society in general. The interconnection between society and science is essential in order to help engaging scientists with more suggesting findings, obtaining a collective wider validation, and also, to help them to review the social usefulness of their results.

The Spanish Scientific community apart from opening, it has adapted a "research social model" which requires an effective own democratization. This model implies a true scientific production to the service of citizenship. This vision is compatible with that held by the most important authors of the moment. If new technologies and the scientific community in general turn into an autonomous subsystem able to integrate new institutions and a radical democracy; then, it will be possible to become interesting for the wide public and receive public funds such as other social services like education itself (Beck, 1992). A scientific community more autonomous has not necessarily turned into a less open one. On the contrary, the scientific community can become a social subsystem dependant to the society demands (Habermas, 1998).

In order to ensure the connection between the scientific community and society, an AE research seminar is organized. It is a space to debate and share their findings and conclusions. In doing so, every three years a Tri- Conference is organized where the whole scientific community (Grupo 90), educational professionals (AEDA) and the participants movement (FAPEA) have the chance to get together. This meeting allows to the scientific community to gather needs and demands from the involved sectors in order to share and validate the research results obtained. The relationship between researchers, professionals and participants is established in an egalitarian level. It is possible because on the one hand, there is a shared common goal which consists in giving an answer to social needs, and on the other, to establish a permanent dialogue with the educational community and at the same time to involve them in the research process itself. In this sense, members of the three sectors compose the research teams. The convergence between knowledge, perspective and researchers, professionals and participants interests enrich the process and the results of the research.

### **Contribution to the Scientific Knowledge Production**

It is very important to hold forums in AE such as AERC or the Tri-Conference, but they are not enough. It is also very important that participants take part in conferences, lectures, seminar... etc. at the national and international level in the educational and social sciences in general. Publications and research results disseminated in journals, reviews or other publications have spread their influence sphere as well as their prestige.

The AE scientific community is becoming more and more significant in areas such as sociology or educational theory. Nowadays, it is a reference for the whole educational community in general. Most part of its contributions is considered valuables in other areas of education, in citizenship social and cultural dinamization within social movements and administration. Some of the proposals related to organizational models, methodologies or participation systems are used for formal education experiences and for social movements in order to organize their activity.

Some of its more relevant contributions are the conceptualization of Dialogic Learning, including the theory of Cultural Intelligence, Communicative Abilities or the communicative methodology. The dual and communicative conceptions in social sciences converge with the dialogic tradition found in adult education history. This is also a reason, which explains why the knowledge produced by the scientific community generates a great interest in other communities, and, in a way, how it has allowed to win a space as well as an egalitarian treatment within a wider scientific debate.

CREA has developed the conception of *dialogic learning*. It represents a qualitative advancement in comparison to the significant learning, which predominates in other fields of education. In the theoretical systematization of the learning process, from the interaction among equals, you can find Freire's contributions to the dialogic perspective; Habermas' communicative interaction and those findings from the scientific community itself (Flecha, 2000; CREA, 1999). Through this concept, the intersubjective process is accentuated in order to promote the learning process and the cooperative construction of knowledge. Educators do not limit to take into account their students previous knowledge to make easier the acquisition of new ones but also ensure an egalitarian dialogue among equals in a sense that all the participants (including educators) construct the widest interpretation of reality possible. Advantages of dialogic learning are obvious when it is pursued to promote instrumental dimensions through the dialogue.

From the concept of Cultural Intelligence, it has been possible to overcome the traditional conception by distinguishing between academic and practical intelligence, but do not include communicative abilities and interaction processes among equals in the learning process. From this notion, it is possible to consider participants without previous academic education as competent persons and orient their own learning processes from their communicative abilities. This notion has been especially useful in order to focus in the process and the pedagogy of the learning and teaching process, accreditation of the previous experience and democratic participation processes (CREA, 1998).

From an interdisciplinary perspective, in cooperation with other Spanish universities as well as Europeans, CREA has developed the communicative methodology, which is also another relevant contribution to the social, which is also being extended to a European level. This methodological perspective is characterized by overcoming other conceptions such as action-research because it eliminates the methodological gap between researchers and participants from the communicative perspective. When considering every person ability to communicate and interpret reality, communicative methodology is based in the use of techniques and methods (everyday live stories, social gatherings, communicative observation...) which gather the voices of all participants by eliminating any hierarchy which situates the researcher above the participant (Diez, Medina & Sorde, 2000)

### **Looking at Successful Transformational Experiences**

One of the most important factors in the development of the AE scientific community has been to research about successful social and educational practices. By successful practices, we mean those which help to overcome social inequalities by transforming the learning process

conditions. This research has allowed to refuse those practices and theories based in the superstition rather than in the scientific knowledge. It has also demonstrated that it is possible to do it in a different way.

In Social Sciences, first Structuralism and later on, Poststructuralism have extended the belief that education can not contribute to improve educational relations as well as social reality. However, a strict study about the successful practices is the best way to fight against such a fatalistic approach. The explanation of how participants transform their lives, their relationships and their actions is a privileged and indispensable kind of knowledge. Moreover, it is very necessary to promote a research of quality which is at the same time socially useful. At the moment, there are multiple possibilities to connect with other contexts and realities offered by new technologies and bringing to us new forms of knowledge.

Experiences such as Highlander Center and the Verneda Adult Education School (Sanchez 1999) are demonstrating successful models in Adult Education in the practice. Looking at them allows us not to fall in the simple theoretical speculation or in the trial-error process by testing with real lives in the society. Both experiences reinforce those contributions made from theoretical developments. Moreover, we find three common elements in both experiences: interactions from the cultural intelligence, communicative abilities and a democratic organizational model. In this research the work from scientific community has been to study these experiences, to organize the knowledge and to contrast it with the most relevant theoretic sociological and pedagogical bases at the moment. In conducting this research, communicative methodology has been used which has allowed including the voice from the practitioners as well as the participants ones. This has been one of the most significant elements in the research process.

This way of conducting research has been also imitated for other scientific communities in the educational area. Since the mid-nineties, a wide range of high quality projects has been developed from the AE Spanish scientific community. It is due to the fact that their researches are connected to strong theoretical perspective, to successful practices and also to the use of communicative methodology.

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