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La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult Education Center: Dialogic Learning and Democratic Participation both Within and Without

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Abstract: La Verneda-Sant Martí adult education center constitutes an example of democratic organization and dialogic learning. This has resulted in both personal and social changes concerning participants in this school and the community where they live. Increased participation results from a deeper trust in personal capability to transform exclusion into inclusion.

Introduction

The 1970s in Spain were years filled with debates, claims, and manifold political and social hopes. With the end of Franco's dictatorship, and the imminent advent of democracy in the mid-1970s, people felt they could make their own contribution to the fulfillment of the ideal of creating a better society through civic and cultural participation. The defense of education as a public good was one of the needs most deeply perceived. Education was seen as a basic lifelong right to be enjoyed by all, regardless of gender, age, ethnic background or socioeconomic level. In such a context, a group of people from La Verneda-Sant Martí, a working-class neighborhood in Barcelona, decided to take over a building that had previously housed several Francoist institutions, and had become vacant in the early years of the new democratic regime. The neighbors claimed for the building to be given different social uses, an adult education center or school, among them. Carmen, one of the pioneers of that center, explained to a group of visiting university professors how this school had been born in the following manner:

The building in which you are now is a Community Center. It used to be a facility used by Franco's dictatorial administration. Therefore, it became vacant in the late 1970s with the advent of democracy, with no specific function assigned to it (...) in 1978, we decided to take over the building and set up a cultural center with all the services we demanded: the childcare center, the school for adults, the youth club, etc. We, the neighbors, decided what we wanted it to be like and what to do to achieve it (...) What still remains from that is the way in which everybody gets involved and participates (...) What we achieved is an extensive cultural project for the community, housed in our center. This center brings together the most of the community's cultural life and that is why here, on its fifth floor, the School for adults is located. (Sánchez Aroca, 1999: 323)

Today, the La Verneda-Sant Martí adult education center has more than 1,600 students, who define themselves as participants, and about one hundred professors and voluntary collaborators. All of them work together for the creation of new learning opportunities and for the improvement of their community. From its inception, the main goal of this school has been to respond to all educational needs formulated by the participants and to make those who have been traditionally excluded from formal education (by reason of their socioeconomic situation or their previously low or non-existing academic level) have a say in these matters, thus fighting social exclusion in a more effective way: from the point of view of participants themselves. In addition, inclusion in the educational sphere entails inclusion in other citizen participation spheres. In this sense, the La Verneda-Sant Martí center defines itself as a Learning Community, that is, as a transformational type of school that fights for the overcoming of inequality by promoting the whole community's involvement.

In the school, solidarity and equality are more than mere words. Both the learning process and the way the center is organized and run are based on the basis of egalitarian dialogue and the democratic participation of all the people. The level of involvement of participants, professors, volunteers and community members in general is the key to the success of this transformational school model.

Creating Possibilities for Learning and Participation

The main goal of the La Verneda school is to promote the participation of all the people. In order to avoid the exclusion of any potential participant, classes are spread all throughout the day and the evening, from 9 am through 10 p.m. Those who are interested in taking part in a given course can do so either in a morning, an afternoon, or an evening schedule, which allows them to combine their education with their family, their job, etc. Some of the school's facilities, such as the computer lab, are open on the weekend as well. This is intended to provide participants and community members in general with as many opportunities for participation as possible.

This can only work if professors are committed to the project and subordinate their personal or corporate interest to that of participants. Volunteers support is just as important. Adults' needs and interests constitute the school's top priority. Participants participate in the definition and design of the education that is on offer at the center: they decide what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. The La Verneda-Sant Martí school offers all kinds of activities: literacy, basic education, special training courses for adults who want to enter the university, and even painting, pottery, and ESL courses, and courses of Spanish or Catalan for foreigners.

All those who are involved in the school's activities in one way or another (professors, participants, volunteers and community members) have the same opportunity to participate in the decision-making bodies. These bodies, which are spaces open for discussion, are in charge of the school management. These are: the assembly, the school council, and the monthly coordination meeting. The school *assembly* meets once a year and can be exceptionally called should any urgent matter require it. It works through direct democracy, since any person who attends it can present issues for collective discussion and solution. The school *council* meets every month and a half and constitutes a forum for the discussion of the school's guidelines and activities. It is also an appropriate forum for discussing how the management of human, material and economic

resources is being carried out. In the *monthly coordination meeting*, both participants and educators coordinate the school's activities, inform those present about those topics they deem relevant, and engage in collective reflection on different issues, ranging from education in general to the specific philosophy that must guide the way the school is run. For more specific, everyday management issues, there is a weekly meeting of those who work there on a day after day basis, which is also open to participants.

As already mentioned, educators and participants collaborate democratically in the management of the school. To that end, participants have organized themselves in two different associations, Àgora and Heura, with an aim to put their ideas and proposals into practice. Àgora is an association that represents participants in the decision-making processes. Through this association, participants have become more involved in the design of specific curricula for adult secondary education, and in the development of projects that bring new technologies and people from all backgrounds closer.

Heura represents all female participants in school activities. The reason for the constitution of such a women's group was the twofold exclusion they suffer: 1. as adults that did not have the chance to follow formal academic education when they were younger, and 2. as women in a sexist society. The main objective of this association is to provide "popular women," that is, those who lack an academic background and suffer from social exclusion for that reason, with a say in the school and their community (Puigvert, 2001). Heura took part in the Women's Conference held in Barcelona in January 1999 by contributing to the general debate on the participation of women in the public sphere. They made it clear there that, although the presence of women in public offices has increased, not all women's voices have been made heard to the same extent as economic and cultural status differences have been important in determining who has become included and who has not.

The La Verneda-Sant Martí center was conceived as a project for a democratic and transformational school subject to continuous renewal and change. It is not a finished project, but one in which participants continue to dream about how they would like to change it in order to convert it into the type of school that all of them want. To that end, there are three workshops for training and project development devoted to reflection and learning. The first one is usually held early in the academic year and is concerned with the professional development of the team of educators. The second one is usually held in the spring and deals with the monitoring of the project (educators and participants meet to discuss new ideas and improvements). The third workshop is held in July and deal with the course's final evaluation. All these workshops constitute a space for the constant renewal of an educational project that belongs to the whole community.

Egalitarian Dialogue as a Basis for Learning

Egalitarian dialogue constitutes the basis for the learning developed in the La Verneda-Sant Martí center. The resulting type of learning is what we call dialogic learning, which starts from those communicative skills that are inherent to all people and from the interaction among equals for the creation and development of knowledge (Fisas, Formariz, García Suárez, and Lleras, 2000). In this way, the idea of educators as expert knowledge-transmitters, and students as

passive subjects that merely receive this knowledge, is questioned and abandoned. In the La Verneda-Sant Martí school people learn from each other, whether they are students or professors. All views, ideas and contributions made by the people, whether in class or in the management and decision-making bodies, are valued according to the validity of the arguments given rather than to the position of power of the person who gives them (Habermas, 1984;1987).

Literary circles provide a specific example of dialogic learning at work. In these circles or periodical gatherings, adults, many of them recently literate (thanks to their participation in literacy classes at the school), meet on a weekly basis to share their reading and their analysis of literary world classics. Dialogic literary circles constitute a new model to understand reading based on the communicative rationality inherent to all people, which must be understood as a circular process according to which the participating readers' life experiences help them read and interpret those works and vice versa - the collective reflection generated within the gathering influences the lives of those who participate in them (Soler, 2001). Through literary circles, many adults who had no access to formal education before and have been, as a result, excluded from a type of culture that has been traditionally considered to be exclusively reserved to an elite, read and comment on works such as Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or Joyce's *Ulysses*. In those gatherings, debate reaches amazing highs and creativity takes those classical works, dealing with all kinds of topics with a social interest, to an extent in which new collective knowledge is created.

Dialogic learning is defined by seven main principles:

Egalitarian dialogue (see above). The fact that validity claims (rather than power claims) are the only ones that count in this type of dialogue also implies that neither educators nor participants should act according to preconceived strategies in order to impose their criteria.

Cultural intelligence constitutes a much broader concept of intelligence. This concept encompasses different types of abilities displayed by all people and developed in different degrees, depending on their experience in different contexts, but of which they are equally capable in principle. These are academic, practical and communicative skills. Thus, an educator will usually display more developed academic skills, since academics are his/her professional field. However, communicative skills are common to all people and allow us all to solve all kinds of problems in our daily life, and acquire all kinds of instrumental learning - for instance, when someone learns how to use a computer by asking around to people who are already knowledgeable. Cultural intelligence as a concept does away with deficit theories and implies taking people's capabilities and skills as a starting point to boost their learning process. It also implies a dialogue among different lifestyles and cultures living in the same community, in which they all grant mutual recognition to each other, which fosters peaceful and respectful coexistence.

Learning's instrumental dimension is not left out of dialogic learning. On the contrary, instrumental learning is one of the components of dialogic learning. Adults participating in presential or virtual forums in which they exchange and share views with people from their own community or even from other countries regarding the same literary world classic, for instance, are practicing and enhancing their instrumental learning (language, computing, reading, etc.).¹

The difference lies in the fact that, in this case, they do not resort to discouraging drills, but to the development of actual practical activities that enhance their instrumental abilities and, thus, their opportunity to be included in the so-called knowledge society and leave social exclusion behind.

Collective interaction and consensus makes it possible for both educators and participants to *create meaning* for each of them. Not only does this mean that their individual lives have a new meaning, but a new collective meaning is created through which people develop a new way to understand the world. This enables them to overcome the loss of meaning Weber had predicted for the industrial society (Weber, 1980).

Solidarity implies that learning takes place through the contributions made by all the people, who are unselfishly both giving and taking, with no competitive obsession or imposition, and trusting each other.

Equality of differences is the dialogic response to post-modern difference-based racism. Post-modern philosophy does not mention the existence of superior or inferior cultures, as was defended by racist authors in the traditional modernity, but emphasizes the idea of diversity and separation for the sake of "cultural survival:" coexistence is not possible neither desirable. The dialogic approach shows how by only emphasizing difference and the "goodness" of separation, cultures that start from a situation of inequality vis-a-vis the dominant culture end up even more excluded - for instance, by being doomed to an education system that reproduces exclusionary elements of separation. The communicative principle of the equality of differences, though, includes the individual right every person has to be different and educated in one's own culture, while, at the same time, enjoying the highest-quality education possible. Through the equality of differences a transformational process unfolds in which freer and more egalitarian conditions for dialogue are created that allow for a new type of communication among cultures and for mutual transformation and intermingling (Flecha & Gómez, 1995).

Transformation, both social and personal, is possible through a type of adult education that draws on people's capabilities rather than on their deficits. Such dynamics enable people to transform difficulty into possibility (Freire, 1997), which reverses the tendency toward social dualization that looms in today's information society. This twofold transformation is the topic of the following section.

A Transformational School Model

The La Verneda-Sant Martí school constitutes a model of education and democratic management. It also promotes the development of parallel grassroots groups and movements in which men and women organize themselves in accordance with their own ideas and claims. For instance, a few years ago, the participants decided to create FACEPA (a federation of cultural

and educational associations connected to the adult education movement in Catalonia) so that the people involved in adult education could make their voices heard.

FACEPA works in the fields of education, cultural and associationism. Its goal is to promote direct participation in all domains - social, political and economic - through egalitarian and transformational social movements. This federation is organized in working groups or committees, which also work democratically.

To FACEPA those who had little or no access to formal schooling in their childhood or teenage years are those who especially need adult education. Among these, those who received poor-quality education or those who forgot what they once learned and need to update it would be also included. And finally, those who received a more solid initial training but need to update it because of society's evolution should also be granted an effective right to access adult education and continue their lifelong learning.

In 1998 FACEPA drafted a "Bill of Participants' Rights." What this Bill states in its preface gives us an idea of how participants understand education and how independent their organization is:

"Education, an inalienable right of all adult people, must be considered as a mechanism toward emancipation that makes the overcoming of social inequalities and power-based relations possible. By education we mean respect and improvement in the dialogue among different cultures and lifestyles that share the same community. Only adults who participate in training processes, have no academic background and do not get paid as adult education professionals (that is, people with a great cultural knowledge who have been so far silenced by the 'academic society') are entitled to design and vote on the enactment of this declaration." (FACEPA, 1998)

FACEPA has an associational tradition through which spaces for the cultural and social participation of all people have been created. This includes both public, institutional, and popular initiatives devoted to public service (broadly understood) and characterized by democratic management, ideological pluralism and community linkage. Both in the school and in FACEPA we have witnessed how, when given the opportunity to participate in activities connected to their education, adults participate and are mobilized as much as (or even more than) any other population sector.

Social transformation feeds from and breeds additional personal transformation as well. Many people could be used as examples of this personal transformation that is connected to dialogic learning in adult education. There are those who were illiterate when they entered the school and, after only a few months, felt confident enough to organize their own literary circles (Flecha, 2000), or those who had not had the chance to complete their primary education and ended up getting a university degree. The fact is that these types of learning communities allow for personal transformations that are as deep as the social ones and that, as a matter of fact, both are intrinsically united.

[Fatima, a North-African woman:] *Now that I have begun, I am happy. No one will stop me* (Sánchez Aroca, 1999:335).

Conclusion

The adult education movement joins a series of active, participatory people that fights for the inclusion of otherwise excluded individuals and collectives (especially in the context of the changes brought about by the new information society). The organization of an adult education center as a learning community in which dialogic learning is practiced and participants democratically participate in the management and decision-making bodies promotes a series of social and personal changes that are felt both directly in the participants' lives and indirectly in the community where they live. This is possible because if basic adult education is organized in this way, a community development project is also developed. People become the agents of their own transformation.

La Verneda-Sant Martí school is a center where people dare to dream because they feel their dreams can actually come true: participants know they can take their demands to the school management bodies, they can democratically shape the type of school they want.

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Footnotes

¹This is the case of the "Gatherings in the Cyberspace" project, sponsored by the European Commission's Socrates Program, developed in the La Verneda-Sant Martí adult education center and coordinated by the Àgora association, in which there are partner organizations from France, Denmark and the Czech Republic as well.