

# Adult Education to Become Citizen. An Experience from Southern Europe

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# **Adult Education to Become Citizen. An Experience from Southern Europe**

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***Abstract:** In this paper, we present a reflection on experiences with adult education and participation. We consider citizenship as something connected to social justice and to social inclusion.*

## **Introduction**

What is citizenship? Who is a citizen? At present, when democracy and participation appears to be threatened, the answer to these questions is critical. However, not everyone believes these concerns are necessary to a person's development. Our experience suggests that when people are encouraged to take part in public issues, they will participate. We examine how adult education facilitates participation, how it is a powerful tool that encourages people to overcome their difficulties and how it educates for democratic and egalitarian communities.

## **Democracy, Participation, Citizenship**

According to Santos (1998), there are three common social contract oriented understandings of representative democracy: i) that social contract itself refers to individuals and their groups; ii) that the concept of citizenship refers to a particular territory, that the people living in this territory are citizens, while those outside of it (e.g., immigrants) are not; and iii) that the contract only holds for public issues and thus the domestic space is not part of the contract. Together, these three understandings entail a specific worldview, one that is white, male, and about people's control of nature. Perhaps it is these shared understandings that led Gaventa (2006) to talk of a crisis of legitimacy. However, we stipulate that the idea of representative democracy must also recover the notions of participation and public space, and we must also recognize that community is a part of this public space.

Wildemeersch & Vandenabeele (2007) describe community as a place in which conflict is common. Towards this end, Mouffe oppose "politics" to "the political". On the one hand, the former refers to a consensual view of community, one that seeks to "reduce political problems to technical issues, which can be resolved by an expert" (Wildemeersch & Vandenabeele, 2007, p. 26). On the other hand, "the political" is associated with insecurity and risk: "People tend to look for protection in their own communities and wish to reinforce the securities offered by those one likes. The world tends to be divided into 'them' and 'us', whereby the 'us' creates a shelter against insecurities and 'the other' can be identified as the reason for these insecurities" (Wildemeersch & Vandenabeele, 2007, pp. 27-28). Thus we take community to be a public space within which debate takes place. A community is not homogeneous; on the contrary, it is a heterogeneous place where conflict and agonisms are a fundamental part of quotidian living. Thus in the public arena debate, contradiction, and deliberative democracy should be the norm. Ultimately, community is not a place that can offer protection from the outside, as there is no

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outside *per se*. In reality, the ‘outside’ is inside the community. This is the context within which we must recover participation?

Gaventa (2006) distinguishes four stages in the evolution of participation: a) In the 1960s, the focus was on the notion that communities could organize themselves to press their claims. Gaventa connects this period with Paulo Freire’s seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. b) The 1980s were associated with the expansion of NGOs. This expansion, together with the concomitant growth in programs related to water, health, agriculture etc., was connected with development as defined by modernization theory (Youngman, 2000). In addition, this era came to be associated with a new term: beneficiaries. Consequently, not only were development program users the only ones who could participate, but all people were not understood to be involved in communities. c) During the 1990s, the scope was made even narrower still. In this period, yet another new term was created: stakeholder. According to Gaventa (2006), this is an ambiguous word that represents the abandonment of community itself. On this account, stakeholders are now held to be “representatives of civil society’s private sector, government, and donors, but not necessarily with any view to whether they indeed represented the poor or excluded *within* these sectors” (Gaventa, 2006, p. 56). d) By the late 1990s, there was a return to the first model: participation as exercising the rights of citizenship. On this account, citizenship was understood as a practice and an engagement, rather than as something defined by law. Thus, citizenship entails the following characteristics: the existence of democratic institutions, the inclusion of disadvantaged people, the obligation to protect and promote rights, and a wide participation beyond the political (e.g., participation in economic, cultural and social dimensions). Gaventa (2006) defines this shift as one of participation, representing a change from rights to opportunities, from citizens to beneficiaries, policies to projects, decision-making to consultation, and from macro to micro.

This shift has other implications, not the least of which is the inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Mohanty & Tandon (2006) describe participatory citizenship as bringing previously excluded or marginalized social actors back into the political arena: “Participatory citizenship offers an elaboration of both citizenship and participation...In this elaborated version, citizenship is rescued from its universal legal status to include the differential positioning of powerless groups” (Mohanty & Tandon, 2006, p. 10).

According to Heller and Thomas Isaacs (2003), citizenship is a relationship between individuals, groups, etc. Ideally, this relationship would be constructed in an egalitarian manner. However, citizenship is subverted by social differences (e.g., class, gender and ethnic). Hence Santos (2003) stipulates that participatory democracy is a redistributive democracy based on egalitarian principles.

In this approach, participation is a strategic element of becoming a citizen, but participation could be hijacked: “Who speaks on behalf of whom? Who sets the framework for participation? Who creates boundaries and dismantles them?” (Mohanty & Tandon, 2006, p. 15). Managing these questions and answers requires training. This training is not only important for the acquisition of citizenship but also for the maintenance of citizenship. When studying the participatory process in Porto Alegre (Brazil), Santos (2003) concluded that training people by encouraging them to take part in the participatory democracy process (in this case, a budgetary process) was fundamental.

Important here are the works of Paulo Freire. Of particular importance are his notions of codification and decoding and his description of people becoming literate. His concept of literacy

goes beyond simply being able to read words: people come to read in order to understand the world better. According to Freire, the most important pedagogical issue for adult education (and for education in general) is to start from peoples' own daily lives and from this standpoint, encouraging them to reflect upon their own reality. Codification, decoding and dialogue allow people to "recognize the situation in their own lives" (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989, p. 140). In this process, individuals become more aware of their problems, their desires, resources, potentialities and their expertise.

### **Methodological Approach**

We conducted Participatory Research (PR) as it reflected a natural way of working in communities and social movements (Hall, 2001). In employing this research there are three important issues to consider regarding PR and its relationships with the practices.

First, a sense of participation needs to be recovered. By stressing the importance of participation, we come to recognize that it is impossible to develop a practice of PR without participation. Orlando Fals Borda, in 1997, advocated for the use of PR as opposed to Action Research (Fals, 1998). According to Hall (2001), we should think of PR as "a descriptive term for a collection of varied approaches which share a participatory ethos" (p. 173). A second matter we wish to consider concerns the concept of *Vivencia* (Fals, 2001): a way to redefine commitment as "a complex of attitudes and values that would give meaning to our praxis in the field" (Fals, 2001, p. 31). The third issue relates to the creation of knowledge, especially to the advantage that knowledge creation confers upon deprived communities, ones that have historically been on the margins of progress. An example would be helpful here. For some years now, in several deprived rural communities in the south of Portugal, we have been conducting participatory research projects for the civil society association, *In Loco* (Fragoso, 2003). At one of these projects, Cachopo, our goal was community regeneration. With respect to economic, social or cultural change, over a period of 10 to 15 years the community regained some of its lost capacity for taking progressive actions in its own development, promoted new learning activities and showed visible changes both in its quality of life and in its local social fabric.

### **Institutional Assignment**

When Seville's City Hall (Spain), following the model of Porto Alegre (Brazil), launched the Participatory Budget process, one of the main problems was that people had a considerable difficulty understanding what was going on. According to data from City Hall, half of Seville's population was functionally illiterate. They had been excluded from the decision-making processes. City Hall decided to confront this problem with a small adult education program. Eventually, this program was broadened to include social movements, and by the second year of the program, it included the development of the *Participatory and Citizenship School*. The primary goal here was for people to be able to overcome obstacles to participation in participatory budget activities. Towards this end, it was important for people to learn how to research their own environment, how to do a project, how to translate the project into official documentation, how to fill-out a form, and how to present a proposal in a public forum. We have adopted a model drawn from the association, Popular Campaign in Kerala (India), whose work

has stressed the importance of training people to participate (Thomas Isaacs & Franke, 2005). The program was developed for The Paulo Freire Institute of Spain<sup>6</sup>.

### **Fieldwork. The Processes of Participation**

Adult education is uniquely suited to the study of citizenship. However, adult education is a broad concept and is related to diverse educational tasks and educative spaces. From a Gramscian perspective, adult education is a contested space, a battle between hegemony and counter hegemony. According to Williams, hegemony is “a whole body of practices and expectations over the whole of living: our sense and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of *ourselves* and our world” (Williams, 1977, p. 110). Hegemony is based on a system of meanings. According to Gramsci, this system of meanings represents only the dominant group in a society. However, if people are to express themselves in other systems of meaning, they must learn how to do so; they need to be educated accordingly. Thus the scope of adult education is considerable. Essentially, it is a battlefield of ideas, each seeking to prevail over others. In our case, it is the success of the ideas of participatory democracy and representative democracy that are at stake. Thus we present two different kinds of projects within this framework.

1. Following Santos (2003), we suggest that training is essential to strengthening and to edifying both participatory democracy and citizenship. Contrarily, as Mohanty & Tandon (2006) point out, it is also necessary to bring disadvantaged groups to the arena. Consequently, we have integrated issues of participatory democracy into the classroom as well as constructed a corresponding set of teaching materials. These materials endeavor to improve literacy skills, while encouraging people to participate. We were able to achieve this by selecting a few generative words (Freire, 1965) (e.g., desire, necessity, democracy, participation). In starting with these words, as well as with people’s real situations (in their own communities and in their neighborhoods) individuals not only became more aware of their situation and their resources but also improved their literacy skills at the same time. For instance, when doing a household budget (itself an exercise in numeracy) people also reflected on the larger municipal budget. Adult education also takes place outside of schools, as social movements. Therefore, we have launched the *Participative and Citizenship School*. The main goal here was to do democratic work both within social movements and outside of them as well. While Offe (1990) suggests that new social movements have a non-hierarchical structure, this did not seem to be empirically true. However, the Participative and Citizenship School did seek to change the structure of social movements. For instance, a prerequisite to taking part in this course was that one could not already be a leader of a specific association. Apart from this, the main goal of the initiative was to teach people to do a project, in this case a budget. In short, our goal was to empower them to research and transform their own community.

2. As Dewey pointed out, you learn by doing. We translate this into people learn to participate by participating. Thus we observed individuals who, in participating, were also becoming a citizen. Indeed we observed a variety of examples: i) Students at an adult education school wanted an elevator that would permit older adults to attend classes. In the organizing process (preparing the project, presenting it in assemblies, etc.,) people discovered not only their own resources but that their needs were also their rights: the elevator was not a necessity but access to the school is a right. ii) In a relatively common process of *gentrification* that occurs in

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<sup>6</sup> Through an agreement between The Paulo Institute of Spain and The City Hall of Seville.

many historical neighborhoods in Seville, people living in a historic neighborhood were evicted from their houses. These neighbors had no home and the owner had abandoned the building. After 15 years of protests and efforts to claim their rights to a house, these neighbors decided to move into an empty block of social houses (property of City Hall). In this instance, we observed people in the daily task of decoding documents from City Hall, writing documents, strengthening social networks, and recovering the history of their neighborhood, discovering the existence of an identity between place and people. iii) Another example of our work (this time in an effort to recover collective histories), we collected individual stories and social histories related to the Civil War and the Dictatorship. Here we sought to help people recover their own stories yet at the same time connect them with history (cf. Lucio-Villegas et al, 2009).

## Conclusions

Popular education is linked to the struggle for social justice. As Freire stipulates, our starting point must always be the people's real situation. Through a process of *conscientização*, people can interpret, understand, and change their world. Hence, we suggest that at present, the essence of popular education is the making of people into citizens. In light of this idea, we reflect on our experiences outlined above:

A) Generally, to need means to lack something that one must have or that one must obtain. However people tend not to think that these needs might also be rights. The right of access to school means that schools must be equipped to facilitate any individual's access. As in the case above, a lift was critical to this access. But more important still is to understand the lift as intrinsic to the right education across the lifespan. The dominant perspective entails an individualistic model of disability (Oliver, 1990), where faults are thought to be in the people themselves. On this account, the fault (or responsibility) lay in the old working-class woman with mobility difficulties. In this case, *conscientização* entails thinking in terms of a social model of disability and fighting to change the 'wrong' elements of the system. Whether it is the old woman requiring a lift or neighbors occupying a social block, what is important is that people ask themselves, what is wrong here? And that they not ask themselves what is wrong with me?

B) Popular education is linked both to communities and to people's everyday lives: the neighborhood is a classroom. The places and spaces for doing education are certainly beyond the restrictions of lifelong learning policies (at least in Europe). They are wider than the school: learning is beyond the classroom. It occurs in daily efforts to become a citizen and to recover one's own history. A history that mainstream history books do not explain: a recovery of the historic networks of solidarity that constitute a neighborhood.

C) Often the acquisition of literacy skills does not include the acquisition of oral skills or public speaking. In a participatory democracy, the process of deliberation is very important. These processes are usually oral performances; they involve speaking in the public arena and the presentation to others of one's own ideas and proposals. This means helping people in the process of improving their own capacities to speak in public arenas and with their capacities to organize such speech with respect to alternative or antagonistic ideas.

D) The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2003) understands participatory democracy as a complicated system of rules. As mentioned above, people do indeed have difficulties understanding the processes of deliberation and presumably its rules. For us, training and learning are not only a significant means of overcoming these difficulties but of

educating disadvantaged individuals about the educative processes connected with the exercise of their rights.

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