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How the study on Jane Addams work at Hull House brings new potential for international adult education discussions?

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Abstract

The discussion points will be raised around the cross-border research challenges on Jane Addams practice as social educator and about a discovery of not fully recognized aspect of adult education through her activism and empathetic knowledge use.

Keywords: Jane Addams, adult education, international discussions, activism, community educator

The purpose of my speech is to inspire participants to an international discussion about the role of adult education in connecting cultures, groups, and individuals around the world, by common desire to support human development and sharing concepts of universal value.

Lifelong learning processes are part of core education values. It is worth to learn more how people who made a difference in the society (as it was in case of Jane Addams), prove the educational value of adulthood. There is also a need for more in-depth study on their reflective and transformative growth.

A great activist, a “mythical” founder of Hull House settlement in Chicago and Nobel award recipient, she is almost unknown in Central and Eastern Europe, and yet her ties to Europe are exceptionally strong: she was inspired by Europe and integrated immigrants from Europe into American society. This lack of knowledge was due to a number of factors such as: the „iron curtain”, stereotypes of thinking about the US, as well as the limited scientific exchange. But how to describe Jane Addams adulthood achievements to new generations in Poland, from what perspective: social work, activism, feminism, peace building, support to immigrants, progressivism, social gospel, philanthropy?

Her fame is international, and her successes arouse keen interest of scientists from all over the world for decades, especially in relation to community work with immigrants from Europe. My research closing in 2022-23, from the perspective of a foreigner, on her role as educator, in the context of working with children, youth and adults at risk of exclusion, led to a number of conclusions of a universal nature. The findings can be connected with contemporary international discussions on the role of social activists as educators: their knowledge and experience in regulating the areas of inequality and social exclusion. But isn't it too simplistic, too narrow? As narrow as to show Ms. Addams as only a social worker.

The project "Jane Addams" in the perspective of adult education, shows a lot of potential in discussing contemporary pedagogical challenges. During my research, I have found at least 5 areas worth discussing around life and activities of Jane Addams:

1. The role of significant others in Jane Adams life as future educator and activist. She wrote about many important role models of adults in her life: family members, teachers, at Rockford College, friends, life companion (Mary Rozeth Smith), residents at Hull House (Julia Lathrop), scientists (John Dewey), donors and many other people with whom she lived, collaborated and learned all her life.

2. The role of adult public life and various public roles' building experiences in learning. In over 500 publications (including 11 books), Addams has been leading conversation with her readers about the world, values, life purpose – as a form of public social education including encouragement to take the responsibilities for social change.
3. The history of community work and international engagements of Jane Addams bring timeless lessons to contemporary adult education role. What can we learn from the past about mistakes, failures, victories. strengths and weaknesses of those who wanted to make a difference? What is the value of role models and social legends in social commitment, engagement in building a culture of help, human solidarity, integration (fighting inequalities, discrimination, exploitation) etc.
4. The phenomenological aspects of „meeting with the neighbours" (the "other", immigrant, poor) as an important platform for recognizing clash of attitudes, stereotypes, prejudices in integration and adult education role to minimize the harm. A lesson for andragogues about learning in different places how to welcome new citizens and be welcomed in an unfamiliar society in the contemporary conditions of mass migrations, social unrest, wars in Europe, (inclusion, exclusion strategies), but also to understand the fears and concerns associated with a sense of fear, uncertainty, loss of stability of "nation ", etc.

In Europe, in the 21st century, instability and unrest of military, economic and social nature encourages the search for effective integration solutions, based on the cooperation and experience of community activism but also challenges adult education patterns (preparation for work, courses for adults). Jane Addams presented in her work with adults, especially with people who began to build their lives in a new society, that the issue is more complex and not of single nature. Addams biographers explained her approach as empathic knowledge application, i.e., knowledge that could be obtained and used only through practice and empathetic attitude.

Contemporary international discussions, policies, or international studies of adult education in the world are dominated by comparative quantitative data that doesn't not consider the subjective, emotional perspectives and narratives on global phenomena, or if research is presented in a qualitative formula, it is usually treated as a marginal element of a small-scale local cases. Empathic knowledge and the example of Addams' work provide us with information on education of an adult who needs to be understand him/her as a learner. The difference between education "for" adults and education that listens to their needs and is based on respect for their culture of living (not necessarily meant as different country but as poverty or disability), gives birth to a new quality of co-constructed education. This knowledge brings a new quality to the discussion on adult education, from the perspective of cultural „otherness", trauma, emotional constrain, or the hope that we can receive through support in our development, even as adults. This is an extremely important aspect of humanitarianism expressed in the belief that an adult not only learns differently, but also needs his rights to learning be recognized. This example of knowledge transfer, through centuries, nations, and educational perspectives, show how the history-informed adult education paths that are worth consideration in present time through cross border collaboration.