

Correcting Inequality in Adult Education Participation

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As never before, the adult learning topic and lifelong learning theme are becoming regular parts of public discourse on education as well as on labour issues and productivity and on basic skills and citizenship. The fact remains, though, that present prolongation of active educational biography is tending more to reinforce life-long reproduction of inequality than to correct educational disparities.

This two-faced reality of an optimistic image of lifelong learning, a discourse often supported by educational theoreticians, on one side, and, on the other side, the on-going dual accumulation of advantages and disadvantages along life-course, has to be publicly exposed. We, specialists of adult learning, tend to remain soft if not silent on this fundamental issue, under the pretext that this trend is well known among us in our seminars and research labs. Intellectual participation in such widespread misinformation, though not premeditated, has to stop.

1. **The trend toward reproduction of educational inequality throughout life**

All adult education participation surveys since the nineties (AETS 1994 and 2003, Literacy 1994 and 2003, WALL 2003, etc.) show that participation to structured adult learning and to active informal learning, in particular related to work, is significantly influenced by socio-economic conditions.

Indeed, higher the level of initial education of people, the higher is the probability of their participation in adult learning activities. The bigger the size of firms hiring you and the higher your place in the occupational hierarchy, the more frequent is your chance to have access to education and training at t workplace. In fact, the current provision of adult learning opportunities and the current conditions to join learning activities tend reproduce the social inequality already experienced by people in school at the beginning of their life course.

In spite of general increase in participation, the common trend is clear: the more you have, the more you will get. The current general economy of lifelong learning tends to mirror and reinforce existing dominating social relations.

Of course there are practices and initiatives that tend to reverse such reproductive patterns like support for active informal learning at workplace, accessibility measures for adults in schools, colleges and universities, adult literacy programs, non work-related adult education centers.

Still in 2003, nearly 60% of people at work do mention that they would like to participate to leaning activities but could not. More than one third of the active population could not mention any informal learning related to their work. The adult literacy provision in this country remains marginal even if we have in this country 40% of the population between 25 and 65 years old who could not master the basic literacy skills standard established by OECD. The rate of participation among working women and men over 55 years old drops severely compared to the younger age strata, and this rate is dropping even more drastically when these people reach the period of their life when, paradoxically, they have more free time.

Of course, corrective practices grow, but do so at a slower pace than the dominant trends. The correcting function of current provision of adult learning opportunity remains marginal. For example, according to the AETS, still in 2003, the probability to join learning activities varies from 1 to 5 or 6 according to level of initial education.

2. The main obstacles to a more widely socially distributed pattern of adult education participation

Obstacles to such participation have been studied since many years and are well known. Bourdieu explained the mechanisms of social reproduction and the role of arbitrary representation of one's capacity as a hidden process of self-selection in line with one's social condition. Using psychosocial approach, other researchers (Cross, Rubenson, Scalan, Drakenwald, etc.) insist on cultural dispositions and dissuasive dispositions, on life conditions and obstacles and on institutional barriers.

If the perceived value of an educational activity and of the probability of being able to participate in and/or benefit from it influence the motivation to participate in learning activities, Rubenson and others have shown that these motivational factors are in large part socially conditioned. In other words, the formation of a learning project or of a learning demand is socially constructed through the accumulation of either positive or negative

learning experiences throughout life, while these learning experiences have been themselves influenced by unequal life opportunities and conditions as well as by unevenly distributed provision of education.

However, if uneven distribution of economic and cultural capital, in our societies, tends to produce and reproduce social inequality through initial education and throughout life, this determination is far from absolute. As noted earlier, correcting practices are developed, atypical forms of participation could be observed that could indicate scenarios for a reversal of prevailing trends.

3. Scenarios for a reversal of dominant trends

What are the scenarios needed to operate a real reversal of trends in adult learning participation? I will suggest six such scenarios:

Space and resources for expression of learning demand at the workplace, in the community, in the media.

The first obstacle to deal with is the lack of space and resources for the expression of the social learning demand. The uneven participation to formal or active informal learning has to be understood (and corrected) upstream, in what goes on before the activities take place or does not occur, that is at the origin of the decision. Such decision is heavily dependant either on the perception by potential learners of their learning capacity or by their perception of the eventual benefit or of the utility of such activities to improve their conditions.

In that perspective, as long as the adult public at work place and in their community will not have the possibility to overcome the anxiety built out of their past experiences and have not the opportunity to express their often unspoken demands, nothing will change in the domain of lifelong learning.

At the workplace, establishment, through laws or collective bargaining, of consultation mechanisms co-managed by employees are needed to receive demands, to give information, to explain possibilities, to mediate a balance between the organisational request and the subjective expectations.

In the community, friendly common public information desks have to be organized in public spaces, like shopping centers and public libraries, to inform citizens and serve as reference center.

Organisation of *Adult Learner's Week* and other forms of mobilisation of adults as learners, like the *Adult Learners Associations*, to give learners a say in the provision of learning opportunities and afford them with tools to negotiate appropriate learning conditions have proved to be effective ways to support expression of learning demands.

The introduction of individual financial supports and time allocation.

Since the first report of a governmental Canadian Commission in 1983 on Paid Educational leave, we have not ceased to discuss formulas for supporting individual participation in adult learning through paid educational leaves, learning credits, learning account, time-sharing devices, registered continuing education saving plan, etc. A special international conference has been even convened by OECD on this subject in Ottawa four years ago. And yet, no results, except some indirect measures in some collective contracts, have been achieved. Of course, a significant number of employees mention partial reimbursement of training fees by their employers. But as the percentage of unmet demand is showing, not to mention the demand unexpressed to one's employer, these reimbursements are important but do meet the need in a very limited way. The prevailing logic at this moment is one of a free market allocating education and training to those individuals who can afford it.

The absolute priority of prolonged initial education for all.

Research has proved over and over again the paramount influence of initial education in the pursuit of an active "career" during adult life. Indeed, one of the best strategies to ensure a just and sustainable learning society is to start by ensuring to ALL children accessibility to a comprehensive and prolonged initial education.

The exercise of the right to significant learning experiences in the first part of one's biography is a fundamental condition to reverse current trends in adult learning. The lack of strong measures to reduce the ongoing rate of dropout among poorer children as well as the limited support for the improvement of learning conditions in public high school situated in underprivileged areas and the rising fees of university without corresponding grants for students in this country are measures that run definitively counter to the construction of a new general economy of lifelong learning so needed economically and socially.

The transformation of existing provision by correcting the uneven distribution between work and no work-related learning opportunities.

As shown by the WALL and the AETS surveys, the current organisation of adult learning opportunities is geared mainly to meet the work-related learning demand at the detriment of other learning demands. Without negating the social demand related to work and employment, a important demand spurred by the flexibilisation of the labour market, the demand for other learning demand is also critical to meet other social and cultural needs. Moreover, for many people, particularly those with lower level of initial education, a first significant learning experience in popular or community education, has proved to be, for them, a turning point in their biography, a take-off phase toward an active learning life, work-related learning included.

Affirmative action for the non publics of lifelong learning.

There will be no reversal of trends without resorting to positive discrimination measures for the non publics of lifelong learning. Ensuring the same measures to all, knowing very well that not all people have the same prior learning experiences and the same living and working conditions, remains a hypocritical policy.

Public interest is at stake in allocating special financial support for less qualified working women and men, for head of monoparental families, for adult who did not have the opportunity to achieve secondary education in their youth, for the growing aging poor population, for migrant families with fewer resources, for people with disabilities.

A general access to formative recognition of prior learning.

Finally, because so many people, through informal self-learning, have acquired competencies and do need to validate these skills in order to fully exercise their right to work and to pursue their personal development, a general access to services of *Prior Learning Recognition* is urgently needed, and more importantly to a formative mode of recognition, one that will help the subject to make a “bilan” of his past educational history and thus be able to explore, as Alheit says, the “potential de sa vie non encore vécue.”

Conclusion

What is at stake is the right to learn of all women and men, the recognition of their dignity as intellectual human beings. What is at stake is the development and pooling of intelligence and skills of people to enable societies to cope with the multiple challenges of

today. The right to learn is not a luxury, it is the enabling right for all the other human rights, for the right to work, the right to a healthy life, to clean environment, to democracy, to autonomous aging.

Collective intelligence, resting on the full exercise of the right to learn of all people all along their life, is an indispensable tool for defending ourselves against current quasi-humanistic but nevertheless destructive fundamentalism.

Collective intelligence is a condition to cease the silent surrender to the insidious trend of growing inequalities among people and countries.

Generalized intellectual qui-vive and alertness are more than a tool, they are the purpose and the profound meaning of a learning society.

Yet the social reproduction function of the current general economy of lifelong learning does continue because it does so under the false image that it does the contrary. Cette comédie a assez duré.