

## **Global challenges and adult learnings for better futures: some reflections**

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### **Introduction**

The World is Burning. This was the title of an Adult Education programme for Active Citizenship organised by a Danish Folk High School in the early 2000s. Yet it applies well to describe today's world as characterised by local as much as transnational challenges that put the planet and its inhabitants at risk and where existing democratic regimes are questioned by raising populist and anti-democratic initiatives and warfare attitudes.

Besides Hamas' assault on Israel on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023, the Israeli response, and the ongoing Russian-Ukraine war, in November 2023, there were more than 110 armed conflicts worldwide, as monitored by the Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights: 45 in the Middle East and North Africa, 35 in the rest of Africa, 21 in Asia, 7 in Europe, and 6 in Latin America.

Against this backdrop, it is worth recalling the question posed at the London conference of 1945 by the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee: "Do not all wars begin in the minds of men [sic!]" . The UNESCO Constitution represented a utopian response, recognising the role education, science, and culture can play in changing people's minds.

This paper questions how adult education can help change people's minds for better and more peaceful futures. While a comprehensive response is not possible, in this paper, I will argue that there is a fundamental need to re-state the social purpose of adult education when looking at its global future.

First, I consider a few poignant challenges of the present. While I acknowledge that climate change is no doubt crucial, other challenges have attracted my attention and are on focus here. Specifically: 1) the rise of populism and anti-democratic trends, 2)

the emergence of post-truth, with the spread of fake news and alternative facts, and 3) the pervasiveness of Artificial Intelligence and conversational agents.

Against this backdrop, I consider a few types of learning that adults need to engage with to live with such challenges while hopefully building better and more peaceful futures. These learnings encompass global citizenship, digital citizenship, and handling Artificial Intelligence.

Finally, I consider how adult education is framed by current international policies and the challenges faced by adult education policy at the national level. Here, I draw on a *Research Handbook on Adult Education Policy* (Milan, Rasmussen and Bussi, forthcoming) that comprises analyses by several colleagues from Europe, the Americas, Africa, and India. On this ground, I conclude with the need to re-state the social purpose of adult education for future policies to help support the kind of learning mentioned above.

### **Populism and anti-democratic trends**

Undoubtedly, populism has gained traction worldwide from the Americas to Europe and is a global phenomenon that permeates the media accounts of contemporary politics as much as public debates and private experiences. Yet populism remains an ambiguous term. As Mouffe (2016) notes, it cannot be said to be an ideology or a political regime. It has no programmatic content either and can take many forms – so has historically and in contemporary democratic regimes. Nonetheless, it is “a way of doing politics” through collective action to question the status quo and the power held by the majority (Ibid.).

Accordingly, and independently from its ideological connotation, for Urbinati (2019, p. 111), ‘populism in power’ is radically partial, as it:

...consists in a transmutation of the democratic principles of the majority and the people in a way that is meant to celebrate one subset of the people as opposed to another through a leader embodying it and an audience legitimizing it.

This can well affect democratic regimes as it impacts their institutions, the rule of law, and the division of powers in constitutional democracies, which, in turn, can lead to authoritarian regimes or dictatorships.

For these reasons, scholars seem to agree that populism has a solid link to democracy, and to stress their symbiosis, some radicals see populism as a ‘parasite of democracy’ (Arditi, 2007). Yet, Urbinati (2019, p. 118) draws an interesting distinction between

populism 'as a movement of opinion', which is oppositional but does not put democracy at risk, and populism 'as a movement that strives to become a ruling power within the state'. In other words, while populism is not an antidemocratic movement per se, when a ruling power vandalises the democratic principles of the majority and the people as it "construct[s] new forms of popular sovereignty that enhance partial inclusiveness, which exists at the expense of democracy as majority/opposition" (Ibid. 124).

### **Post-trust, fake news, and alternative facts**

Paralleling the traction of populism, several observers claim we live in a post-truth world (e.g., McIntyre, 2018; Sim, 2019). The ample use of alternative narratives of facts in politics, the media, and social interactions corroborates this. Facts – what can be proved to have happened – are ignored by alternative narratives that are often accompanied by the mystification of science and circulate through traditional and new media, thanks to the expansion of, and accessibility to, social media. Accordingly, fake news is created and distributed, affecting how people feel and understand the world. Put bluntly, fake news, alternative narratives, and the feeling these can arouse often acquire more weight than evidence of what happened.

Post-truth has been supported and well served by the expansion of communication technologies, with the possibility to instantly transmit a message to vast audiences, who will then pass it to their networks through social media. Several studies have analysed, for instance, the travelling of fake versus real news through social media like Twitter (now X), showing how receivers tend to re-share fake news more than actual news (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

While facts and events can be interpreted from different viewpoints or reported differently, the nature of the evidence on which interpretations can be proposed is not to be questioned. Yet, post-truth refers to the assertion of ideological supremacy that individuals, groups, or institutions exert to force others to believe in something independently of the evidence (McIntyre 2018). For Sim (2019), this fundamentally changes the political debate and questions the use of reason in the public sphere, which needs defending.

### **The pervasiveness of Artificial Intelligence and conversational agents**

Finally, Artificial Intelligence (AI) – which also supports the creation and circulation of fake news – has become a pervasive element of human life. Especially conversational agents – software that interacts with humans by natural language in speech, like virtual assistants, or text, like chatbots (Gnewuch, Mo-rana, & Mädche, 2017; McTear, Callejas, & Griol, 2016) – are now widely applied by public and private services. Many

adults engage in conversations with such agents in their everyday life – consciously or unconsciously – when asking for assistance from their energy or electricity company, mobile or internet provider, or when planning a trip for business or pleasure, to mention a few examples. But some conversational agents can also assist humans in generating novel text and images thanks to so-called ‘generative’ AI technologies.

Generative AI technologies introduced far-reaching changes in how humans enter a conversation with machines (or software) and are well described by Gimpel and colleagues (2023) as a nested conception. At a higher level of abstraction is *AI*, encompassing all techniques and approaches to make machines capable of acting in an environment. *Machine learning* (ML) allows computers (or software) to learn and improve on a specific task by identifying patterns and predictions based on algorithms applied to input data. Now, generative AI, typically using ML, can generate new data or outputs in the form of text, images, or music. Large language models (LLMs) are a specific ML model capable of processing and generating natural language text. In other words, LLMs are *generative AI* that can produce novel outputs in the form of text, applying algorithmic patterns to learn from a large amount of input data. Therefore, *conversational agents* are generative AI that can enter natural language conversations with people and use LLMs to generate text mimicking human-like language and style.

ChatGPT by OpenAI (first released in 2018) is an excellent example of a LLM-based conversational agent. However, other conversational agents also exist that use, for instance, *text-to-image* (TTI) models and can convert text prompts generated by humans into novel images, like DALL E 2 (also by OpenAI) or Stable Diffusion (by Stability).

The sophistication of AI technologies, especially when considering conversational agents, is expected to increase with time. While some fear they will replace humans, others insist they are still trained on large but limited input data. Hence, their learning could be better, and they cannot capture the nuances or precision of a human conversation (Azaria, 2022). Undoubtedly, conversational agents present some advantages – for example, they are often permanently available and accessible from multiple locations (Hobert, 2019). Yet not only do they have limits, but they also present risks that people should be fully aware of when conversing with them.

Today, an increasing number of adults are making use of generative AI technologies in their study or profession (including adult teachers and educators) but are often unaware of the underlying LLMs and the limits of generative AI technologies or do not adequately consider the risks such technologies pose from an ethical point of view. At the same time, a large pocket of the adult population ignores or fears generative AI technologies and, therefore, does not benefit from the potential advantages these could bring to improve, for instance, their study or working performance.

## Learnings for the future

Considering the global challenges illustrated thus far – namely populism and anti-democratic trends, post-truth, fake news and alternative facts, and the pervasiveness of AI and conversational agents – there are different types of learning that adults need to live with such challenges while building better futures for all. Here, I restrict attention to global citizenship, digital citizenship, and dealing with AI.

*Global citizenship* encompasses learning *for* and *of* global citizenship. Adult learning *for* global citizenship is what allows the acquisition of citizenship values, understanding, perceptions and skills that are global and non-parochial, for instance, through the active involvement of adult learners in international exchange programs or collaborative online international learning experiences, or what stimulates adult agency and change in knowledge, awareness, and lifestyle, with the goal to promoting collective change. Adult learning *of* global citizenship is what occurs, for instance, through activism or participation in coordinated political actions to strive for a more just society at the global level.

Reconciling learning *of* and *for* global citizenship from a humanist and social-justice-oriented perspective, Jenkins (2021) proposes a model for ‘Ecological global citizenship education’, which is centred around a dialogue between individual and collective learning pedagogies to promote critical thinking, cognitive, affective, and transformative learning through critical pedagogies, collaborative and community learning practices. Meanwhile, Milana & Tarozzi (2021) conceptualise adult education and global citizenship learning as ‘interlocked conceptions’ and propose a Four-dimensions approach encompassing aims (what for), contents and skills (what), processes and pedagogies (how), actors and learning environments (who).

*Aims (what for)* concern the purposes of adult education or what represents educationally desirable goals in terms of global social justice. Adult education and learning as global citizenship education aim to empower learners to engage and assume active roles at local and global levels. But with the aspiration of addressing global challenges and becoming proactive contributors to a more just, tolerant, inclusive, secure, and sustainable world.

*Contents and skills (what)* encompass the cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural learning domains of global citizenship education, which need to be translated into learning outputs to guide the planning of intentional processes (education) by institutions, professionals, or volunteers aimed at adult learners, should also cover active citizenship skills to foster participation and public engagement.

*Processes and pedagogies (how)* cover the political and practical processes involved in translating statements of principle and policy recommendations into genuine pedagogies, teaching methods, and learning activities. Accordingly, transformative pedagogies, in line with the social purpose of adult education, are crucial to bringing about personal and social change through experience and action.

Finally, *actors and learning environments (who)* denote the active engagement of multiple institutions and stakeholders in promoting global citizenship learning in formal, non-formal and informal contexts in which adults engage.

In short, recognising that adult education and global citizenship are ‘interlocked’ supports democracy and helps intersect, as Torres and Dorio (2015, p. 5) put it, “individual development as a participatory process with sustainable development and peace education fostered by a model of global commons.”

*Digital citizenship* involves learning to engage with digital technologies to responsibly participate in local, national, and global communities at all levels (political, economic, social, and cultural) and in defence of human rights and dignity (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017). It can be part of global citizenship learning when it encompasses the acquisition of knowledge needed to utilise digital tools and new media consciously and responsibly, but also critical thinking that can make adults sensitive towards potential risks and to contrasting hate speech. Therefore, digital citizenship learning brings together digital literacy – the ability to use the internet, new information and communication technologies – with media literacy – the capacity to access, analyse, build, and assess messages across different media, but it is more than that.

*Dealing with AI* calls for complex thinking. Yet, restricting attention to conversational agents, adults need to familiarise themselves with and learn how to use them best (see Milana, Brandi, Hodge, & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2024). For instance, Gimpel and colleagues (2023) suggest several areas in which generative AI technologies could benefit university students that are equally relevant for adults using conversational agents in different learning environments or for their professions. First, conversational agents – like ChatGPT – necessitate adequate prompts to generate valuable results. Producing such prompts, as much as evaluating the quality of the results, requires adults to logically organise and categorise information in a coherent way, hence helping structure their thinking (Ibid.). Second, multiple iterations with conversational agents can help refine the process of, e.g., novel text or code generation, but also to use conversational agents in a more instrumental way, e.g., to summarise – rather than produce novel – text (Ibid.). In short, following these authors, adult learners may think of conversational agents as ‘partners’ in creating text (but the same could be said for creating images). This, however, implies that adults are aware that conversational agents cannot hold responsibility for the results they produce and that such results

may not be updated, trustworthy or accurate (Atlas, 2023). In fact, one of the biases of conversational agents is the loss of connection between the information it provides and its source. Therefore, the results of any prompt need adult learners or professionals to verify their correctness and to look for valid sources of the information they contain.

### **Adult education policy: international framing and national challenges**

Thus far, I have considered the rise of populism and anti-democratic trends, the emergence of post-truth, the spread of fake news and alternative facts, and the pervasiveness of AI among the poignant challenges of the present. Accordingly, I have been arguing for adult education to support global citizenship learning, digital citizenship learning, and learning to deal with AI to cope with these challenges. Yet the question of what kind of public policies may support such learning remains open.

At the international level, attention to adult education is on the rise if we consider the UNESCO *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education* ratified in 2015 (UNESCO, 2015), the increased monitoring of policy developments in this field by the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning through the five *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE) published to date, and the 2022 commitment to the *Marrakesh Framework for Action* at CONFINTEA VII.

The UNESCO Recommendation expands attention from the intentional organisation of learning experiences that education represents and includes the results of such experiences: learning. Hence, it considers the education and learning of adults as ‘a core component’ of learning experiences that are lifelong and lifewide, and ‘a building block’ of a learning society. This concept is inherently linked to the economic development of nations. As Peter Jarvis (2000) reminded us well before the 2015 Recommendation, a learning society is *futuristic* as it depends on technological advances; is *societal*, as it aims for the betterment of societies through economic growth and democratic citizenship engagement; it is *reflexive*, as learning should enable adaptation to change and flexibility; and finally, it is a *global market* where education and learning become commodities!

Now the *Marrakesh Framework for Action* recognises the ‘long-term structural impact of the COVID-19 pandemic’, the threats to societies “by rising fanaticism and violent extremism, growing distrust in science and rising inequalities within and between countries” (MFA, p. 1-3), reiterates the need for ‘gender equality and the rights of all’, and affirms adult education and learning as a fundamental human right, thus framing education as a public endeavour and a common good.

Paralleling these global framings of adult education, in Europe, education has been seen as an essential element of the European integration project (Hingel, 2001; Milana, 2023). This opened the door for a slow but steady formation of adult learning as a fully-fledged policy domain at the European level (Milana & Klatt, 2019), influenced by labour, economic and social concerns. Hence, the Council of the EU first agreed upon a European Agenda on adult learning following the 2010 Eurozone Crisis (CEU, 2011) and renewed during the COVID-19 pandemic (CEU, 2021).

A comparison of the Council's beliefs on adult learning that crystallised in these ten-year agendas reveals how the normative assumptions on adult learning have moved from the realm of the 'possible' – i.e., targeted adult learning could support economic progress – in response to the 2010 Eurozone Crisis, to that of the 'certitude' – i.e., at certain conditions adult learning produces positive outcomes –, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Milana & Mikulec, forthcoming). Having traced the evolution of these policies through phases of EU development and critical junctures such as the 2008 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, Bussi and Milana (forthcoming) argue that the trajectory of these policies has had a dominant economic orientation, with incremental changes that invested in skills for work more urgent and pressing over time.

In short, under different ideational frameworks, governments are increasingly committing themselves to support expanding adult education in Europe as much as globally. But another picture emerges when we consider adult education policy within the same countries that signed those commitments.

In several countries, adult education holds a weak position in policy agendas, which nonetheless privilege an economic logic (Torres, 2013), as do much of European policies, and contribute to, rather than solve, inequalities.

For instance, in Eastern Europe, Kopecký, Šerák and Sycha (forthcoming) point out that as part of Czech national education policy, adult education has had a marginal position since the 1990s and argue that especially social changes framed by post-communist transformation, a neoliberal turn, and the Europeanisation process that followed the country access to the EU in 2004, contributed to assigning peripheral and instrumental roles to adult education. Meanwhile, Popović and Maksimović (forthcoming) consider that hybrid political regimes developed in the post-communist world have shaped adult education policy. Speaking of Serbia, a hybrid political regime characterised by democratic structures and authoritarian practices, they argue for a discrepancy between the adult education policy documents presented in public and to other countries – e.g., to attract funding – and policy implementation.

In Central Europe, Stephanus and Vero (forthcoming) point out that in France re-skilling has become essential to secure worker career paths, meeting labour market shortages and supporting the green and digital transitions, but show that low-skilled workers benefit less than other social groups from the implementation of re-skilling programs; whereas in Belgium (i.e., the Walloon Region), for the past two decades, as Conter (forthcoming) argues, the dominant political discourse has made individuals responsible for their employability, while training programmes target individuals before entering or after leaving employment but not those in occupations.

In the Americas, examining the U.S. federal policy for adult basic education, Belzer (forthcoming) argues that a neoliberal agenda promotes it single-mindedly as a driver of individual and social economic benefit; this means that less tangible benefits of improved foundational skills 'do not count'. Whereas in Mexico, as Hernández Flores, Campero Cuenca and Mendez Puga (forthcoming) note, despite a reformed legal framework for youth and adult education, governance remains challenging for designing and implementing actual provision.

In India, while ideas and objectives of national adult education policy have often drawn on international guidelines and resources, as Singh (forthcoming) argues, a lack of political will among national stakeholders has been a persistent challenge to its implementation.

Lastly, in French-speaking African countries, according to Biao (forthcoming), the low priority given to adult education by the former colonial power, France, still affects adult education policy.

## **Conclusion**

The above review of national adult education policies points to the fact that while some countries still focus primarily on adult literacy, often this focus co-exists with a stronger emphasis on training provision to meet work and labour market needs rather than individual and societal demand. These concerns seem to ignore either the rise of populism and anti-democratic trends, the emergence of post-truth, the spread of fake news and alternative facts, or the pervasiveness of AI among the poignant challenges of the present. By contrast, for public policy to envision a kind of adult education that supports global citizenship learning, digital citizenship learning, and learning to deal with AI to cope with these challenges, policymakers should give full recognition that adult education has an inherently social purpose. Hence, re-stating the social purpose of adult education calls for advocating – on the part of civil society and academia – for better policies that frame adult education as providing adult learners with “knowledge that they can use collectively to change society [...] or challenge social inequalities and injustices” (Fieldhouse, 1992, p. 11), to promote community

development (Brookfield, 1987; Freire, 1970), and to allow the formation of a type of citizenship that embraces cultural diversity and pluralism (Johnston, 1999).

If war begins in the minds of men – and women – a peaceful coexistence requires a different nourishment of people’s minds. While populism and post-truth tend to divide and radicalise people by making the use of reason in the public sphere obsolete, and AI supports all this, by contrast, educating adults on how to deal with AI and act as digital and global citizens can challenge inequalities and injustices and promote collectively social change.

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## **Global challenges and adult learnings for better futures: some reflections**

Marcella Milana

### **Abstract**

Local and transnational challenges put the planet and its inhabitants at risk while existing democratic regimes are questioned by raising populist and anti-democratic initiatives and warfare attitudes. In this article, I interrogate how adult education can help change people's minds for better and more peaceful futures, limiting attention to a few poignant challenges of

the present: 1) the rise of populism and anti-democratic trends, 2) the emergence of post-truth, and 3) the pervasiveness of Artificial Intelligence and conversational agents. I then consider a few types of learning (global citizenship, digital citizenship, and dealing with Artificial Intelligence) that adults need to engage with to live with such challenges while hopefully building better and more peaceful futures. Finally, I consider how adult education is framed by current international policies and the challenges faced by adult education policy at the national level. In short, I argue for a fundamental need to re-state the social purpose of adult education for future policies to help support the learning above-mentioned.

### **Keywords**

adult education, global citizenship, digital citizenship, artificial intelligence, social purpose

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## **Défis mondiaux et apprentissage des adultes pour un avenir meilleur : quelques réflexions**

Marcella Milana

### **Résumé**

Les défis locaux et transnationaux mettent en péril la planète et ses habitants, tandis que les régimes démocratiques existants sont remis en question par l'émergence d'initiatives populistes et antidémocratiques ainsi que d'attitudes belliqueuses. Dans cet article, je m'interroge sur la manière dont l'éducation des adultes peut contribuer à changer les mentalités en vue d'un avenir meilleur et plus pacifique, en me concentrant sur quelques défis marquants du présent : 1) la montée du populisme et des tendances antidémocratiques, 2) l'émergence de la post-vérité et 3) l'omniprésence de l'intelligence artificielle et des agents conversationnels. Ensuite, j'examine plusieurs types d'apprentissage (citoyenneté mondiale, citoyenneté numérique et maîtrise de l'intelligence artificielle) que les adultes doivent acquérir pour relever ces défis tout en aspirant à construire des futurs meilleurs et plus pacifiques. Enfin, je discute du cadre de l'éducation des adultes dans le contexte des politiques internationales actuelles et des défis auxquels sont confrontées les politiques d'éducation des adultes au niveau national. En conclusion, je plaide en faveur d'une nécessité fondamentale de réexaminer l'objectif social de l'éducation des adultes afin que les politiques futures soutiennent l'apprentissage susmentionné.

### **Mots-clés**

éducation des adultes, citoyenneté mondiale, citoyenneté numérique, intelligence artificielle, objectif social

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## **Desafíos mundiales y aprendizaje de adultos para un futuro mejor: algunas reflexiones**

Marcella Milana

### **Resumen**

Los desafíos locales y transnacionales ponen en peligro al planeta y a sus habitantes, mientras que los regímenes democráticos existentes se ven cuestionados por el aumento de iniciativas populistas y antidemocráticas y de actitudes belicistas. En este artículo, me planteo cómo la educación de adultos puede contribuir a cambiar la mentalidad de las personas en pro de futuros mejores y más pacíficos, centrándome en algunos desafíos conmovedores del presente: 1) el auge del populismo y las tendencias antidemocráticas, 2) la aparición de la posverdad y 3) la omnipresencia de la inteligencia artificial y los agentes conversacionales. A continuación, examino algunos tipos de aprendizaje (ciudadanía global, ciudadanía digital y manejo de la inteligencia artificial) que los adultos necesitan para enfrentar estos retos y, al mismo tiempo, construir un futuro mejor y más pacífico. Por último, considero cómo se enmarca la educación de adultos en las actuales políticas internacionales y los retos a los que se enfrenta la política de educación de adultos a nivel nacional. En resumen, defiendo la necesidad fundamental de replantear la finalidad social de la educación de adultos para que las políticas futuras contribuyan a apoyar el aprendizaje antes mencionado.

### **Palabras clave**

educación de adultos, ciudadanía global, ciudadanía digital, inteligencia artificial, finalidad social