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EDITORIAL



In times of trouble, what is the role of lifelong education and educators?

Steven Hodge , Ulrik Brandt , Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert , Marcella Milana 
and Thomas Howard Morris

Research and practice of adult and lifelong education and educators has always been tinged with ethical considerations, arguments and debate. Sometimes, the ethical dimension appears muted – such as when the focus is on attitudes to skill acquisition – but at other times, adult and lifelong education is positioned as a distinct force of good through its role in realising social justice, personal realisation and spiritual goals. While it would never be possible or desirable to mandate an overarching moral purpose for our extremely diverse field, the history of the field’s scholarship and the ethical tenor of leading authors make it reasonable to ponder our role at a time when key institutions of order appear to be teetering and whole communities are suffering the ravages of inhuman brutality. This is at a time when our knowledge, skills – our learning – and technical and artistic achievements are reaching dizzying heights. These are times of trouble, and adult and lifelong education may offer one platform for hope. In this editorial, we bring to mind ethical arguments and claims of the field from the past, and tap into the recent work of Bagnall and Hodge (2022) which sought to analyse manifestations of the field in terms of linked ethical and epistemological paradigms. In this editorial, we conclude that although our field is marked by legitimate epistemological diversity, adult and lifelong educational practice is always ethically charged in some way and for that reason carries the seeds of hope for a better world over and above imperatives of meeting immediate needs and goals.

The multiple lines of development that can be traced to today’s multifarious field of adult and lifelong education each betray an idealistic tone. In North America, the optimistic yet deeply considered pragmatism of Dewey (1916/2000) was turned to account by Lindemann (1926). He released a manifesto of adult learning that to this day sparkles with a vision of adult potential that is still fresh in its observations and reasoning. Lindemann’s vision is one that seems almost blissfully unaware of the totalitarianism dormant in the ideological humus of the technocratic world that Dewey and colleagues celebrated at the turn of the 20th Century. Yet for Lindemann, there *were* critical tasks, such as defining and challenging institutions and attitudes that constrained adult flourishing beyond traditional boundaries of education and work. Past a successful challenge to those forms, adults would be able to chart a boundless course of learning and self-realisation guided by the underlying currents of life and growth that Dewey found in the dialectic of mind, society and nature.

The impetus provided by Lindemann grew in strength in North America. By the 1970s, the field of adult education was large, both as an institution with thousands of educators and countless students engaged in practices that were mostly distinct from the forms of mass schooling, and as an emerging scholarly discipline. Writers like Knowles (1970) elaborated the idea that adults were a different kind of learner than children, and that adult learning therefore demanded different techniques and approaches from educators. In this argument adults – but also young people – need to given respect and autonomy and be served by a new kind of educator committed to a humanistic

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vision of continuous learning and growth. Knowles' principles are still influential and numerous versions of the doctrine of the needs of the adult learners and the device of 'andragogy' can be found circulating on the internet.

In Europe, the origins of adult and lifelong education lie in various initiatives of a liberal and egalitarian nature. Across countries including Scotland, Sweden and Germany in the wake of Protestant movements in the 1600s, literacy campaigns emerged that promoted reading of scripture by laypeople (Arnové & Graff, 2013). After the Enlightenment, 'reading societies' built upon the groundwork of literacy campaigns in which secular works including those of radical philosophers were studied. These societies flourished from the 1700s and are viewed as precursors of modern adult education in Europe. In the 1800s, worker education societies emerged that sought to 'liberate' through knowledge and give workers power to negotiate in developing industrial economies and contribute to progress directly (Jarvis, 2004). So-called 'Mechanics Institutes' in the UK and America promoted the ideal of a new kind of citizen that would tend the machines, improving them and forming the knowledge base of the future. Later, the Workers Education Associations (WEA) established institutions and embarked on an educational mission that saw diverse curricula offered at no or minimal cost to workers and poor citizens. Although the WEA movement declined in the early part of the 20th Century, university adult education rose in its place (Steele, 1994). Recognition of the benefits of knowledge and commitment to making those benefits available beyond the walls of academia drove the institutions and tutors that made this kind of adult education a reality.

Latin America has its own trajectory of adult and lifelong education that is explicitly tied to social emancipation with spiritual implications. Freire (1970/2005) offered the keynote argument for this ethical vision. Incorporating Marxian ideas and their critical gravity, Freire built an encompassing, even grand account of the emancipatory potential of an education that not only promised to release those whose oppression is marked by poverty and inequity, but those who orchestrate oppression and benefit from it. Marxian optimism and Christian salvation doctrine combine in one vision of adult education to elevate humanity as such.

While this quick survey makes clear the ethical interests of founders of adult and lifelong education movements in a few contexts, contemporary developments are, as a whole, more diverse in terms of philosophical commitments. A comprehensive overview prepared by Bagnall and Hodge (2022) aimed to tease out epistemological and ethical dimensions of major paradigms for understanding the field. A key argument of that overview is that identifiable movements value certain kinds of knowledge and that these forms of knowledge convey and amplify values. The nexuses that can be observed may be common to different movements and institutions, so the term 'paradigm' is employed to designate these overarching forms. The survey with which this editorial began can be comprehended in terms of these paradigms. For example, the Dewey-inspired tradition of North American adult education articulates a *developmental* paradigm wherein knowledge that is valued concerns individual and cultural development. This paradigm can also be characterised in terms of constructivism and humanism. 'Development' draws attention to the notion that there is something valuable that is nascent (in individuals, groups or cultures) and that through different kinds of experience, but pre-eminently educational experience, may be elaborated and manifested. Mezirow (1991), for instance, finds that the process of learning undergone by adults in which their world-views and ideas of the self are challenged and potentially shifted overcomes enculturated limitations and gives learners a more open, rich, accommodating view of the world and empowers them to participate in new ways with others and society. This example illustrates that the developmental paradigm articulates with humanism in that all people carry the potential for an individually agentic, expansive existence with scope to contribute in distinctive and empowering ways to their communities.

Our survey of movements also brought attention to a *disciplinary* paradigm, evident in reading societies and university adult education. In these examples, the ethical interest is not so much in disclosing human potential but in the value of verifiable, objective knowledge. Such

knowledge is not only good in itself but valuable in the wider context of modernity. Here, methodically derived and carefully curated and organised knowledge of the world is the foundation of progress, prosperity, health, order and general human wellbeing. It is this cultural grounding of the valuation of disciplinary knowledge that gives the paradigm its unique nexus of epistemological and ethical dimensions. Consistent with the principles of the Enlightenment, advocates of an adult education based on imparting disciplinary knowledge to a wide range of learners see such acquisition as inherently liberating. Value lies in both the discipline involved in learning this kind of knowledge and the knowledge itself. Our thinking processes can emerge sharper, more demanding and critical, and the knowledge we can come to possess is 'powerful', as Young (2007) says, both socially and in terms of our relationship with the world of nature (which includes our bodies).

Apart from the developmental and disciplinary paradigms, our survey touched on adult and lifelong learning and education that have *emancipation* as its goal. The work of Freire (1970/2005) leads to a form of liberation different to that claimed by the disciplinary paradigm and addresses immediate social and economic conditions that conspire to oppress. While the liberal education approach seeks to disabuse us of cognitive constraints, emancipatory education addresses material constraints that arise from socially inequitable structures. Epistemologically, education aligned with the emancipatory paradigm is marked by analyses of situations to expose the workings of power and raising to consciousness the hidden interests creating inequity. The truth of power is thus revealed and this critical knowledge illuminates oppression and guides tactics and strategies for overcoming it. The field of adult and lifelong learning and education is characterised by a wide range of contributions in this vein (e.g. Brookfield, 2011; Hart, 1990).

What Bagnall and Hodge (2022) term the *design* paradigm is another that can be comprehended in terms of Modernism, but in this case the interest in efficiency and personal responsibility is foregrounded. Concepts of technicism and instrumentality align with this paradigm. That is, education is regarded as a means to the acquisition of useful knowledge and skills, although precisely what those knowledge and skills are is not prescribed. Epistemologically, then, this paradigm is different to the previous three, each of which were characterised by a claim to a certain kind of knowledge. The design paradigm is concerned with the efficacy of educational efforts, so the methods by which learning can be facilitated to become a form of knowledge that is concentrated in a sort of repository. Educational thinkers like Tyler (1949/2013) and Gagné and Medsker (1996) elaborated these methods which, although they were not necessarily crafted with adults in mind, have an enormous impact on learning experiences in the field. Returning to the techniques of the design paradigm, the goals of education as such cannot be found within the repository. The ethics associated with this paradigm does shed light on broader purposes of adult and lifelong learning and education. An 'accommodative' ethics can be discerned here that finds value in productive engagement in society. Here, the ideal is that adults fit into society, contribute to it, and at the same time assume responsibility for their fit and contribution and the ongoing development of their own capabilities. The overarching point of these accommodations lies in the context, and in our time that means economic imperatives shapes the ethics associated with the paradigm. Particular situations in which we are confronted by the need for ethical decisions draw guidance from the prior commitments we have to the context, reducing the scope of situations themselves to generate ethical reflection and action.

Adult and lifelong learning and education policy and practice as we know them always reflect one or more of these paradigms, but the design paradigm along with its accommodative ethics – an epistemology and ethics that efficiently channel the neoliberal value system of the times – is dominant. Economic goals are taken as valuable for their own sake. Prosperity, competition, entrepreneurship, 'innovation' become values that are in tension or conflict with those which guided earlier adult education movements and scholarship. In some cases, these economic norms are conducive to the conditions other paradigms sought to overcome. It is no surprise, then, that there is consternation among critical lifelong education researchers over the penetration

of instrumental values and practices into policies and programmes intended to address disadvantage and empower adults. In times of trouble, economically informed adult and lifelong learning and education does not necessarily promote critical voices and visions of a just future that can effectively confront the arguments and forces of violence, falsehood and inequity. Instead, various forms of accommodation prevail allowing the potential of our field to dissipate.

But what is to be done? As researchers and practitioners, we can always do our part in small ways or at scales we can effect to go against the tide. Throughout the field, there are critical educators pursuing opportunities to develop our humanity, share powerful forms of knowledge and facilitate emancipation (e.g. Lange, 2023). For scholars, there is the question of the paradigms themselves and what further shifts may be evident. Bagnall and Hodge (2022) argued that there are signs the design paradigm is giving way to another that is emerging on instrumental foundations but which responds to limitations that have gradually eroded the self-evidence of the dominant paradigm. This argument follows the two lines of epistemology and ethics employed in relation to the other paradigms. On the epistemological side, confidence appears to be slipping in relation to the efficacy and benevolence of pre-specified outcomes and their use to yield learning algorithms. A 'reflexive epistemology' is emerging that foregrounds knowledge that informs individual identity. Knowledge of the world is important, but is activated insofar as it confirms our prior knowledge and supports our personal activities and aspirations.

On the ethical side, the emergence of what Taylor (2007) terms 'expressive individualism' is undermining faith in the universal and progressivist claims and aspirations of the ethical systems informing the design epistemology. Following contributions of Taylor, Giddens (1991), Jarvis (2006) and others, Bagnall and Hodge (2022) set out dimensions of contemporary expressive individualism. Both subjectively and objectively, we seem to be embracing demonstrations of our authenticity and uniqueness. Our various projects are selected for their potential to affirm our identity, and in turn these inform our thinking and behaviours. We value others for their recognition of our individuality, and we draw from their expressions the material for the further affirmation of our own. The internet and social media have become powerful vehicles for demonstrations of our authenticity and a source of demonstrations from which we can select to guide our expressions. Even when there is little or no scope for an influential other to know and affirm us personally, their alignment to our projects as confirmed through their expressions is sufficient to warrant a sense of recognition for common projects of authenticity.

Lifelong learning is clearly implicated in the emergent paradigm. It is assumed by our selection of and active commitment to life projects, all of which require learning and development before a project can truly become our own. For instance, a 'fitter self' presents a life project that calls for research and evaluation of alternatives, acquisition of sometimes sophisticated knowledge and skills to inform pursuit and customisation, then another set of capabilities to effectively present this project as our own for the approval of ourselves and others. Jarvis (2006) wrote about the way lifelong learning has become a necessary accompaniment in our pursuit of authenticity. Traditional educational avenues are limited with respect to what they can supply for diverse projects that come and go and ramify across the life course.

That an ethics of authenticity and reflexive epistemology may be emerging from the design paradigm is not necessarily a hopeful sign in troubled times. Bagnall and Hodge (2022) observe that 'authenticity may be seen as a significantly *egoistic*, self-regarding ethic, in that our actions are focused on our own individual self-respect . . .' (2022, p. 275). With the kinds of upheaval we are seeing which visit horrors upon whole communities in different parts of the world, it is perhaps consistent with the tenets of authenticity that we can distance ourselves from the suffering of our contemporaries and maintain interest in our projects regardless. Those disasters may be considered an extreme, even aberrant playing out of other's projects, projects to which we do not subscribe or cannot even imagine inhabiting. The insulation among projects of authenticity is something we might expect. Bagnall and Hodge argue that,

The pervasive quest for identity as an ethic of authenticity ... opens the window for us to restrict our lifelong learning engagements to those that reinforce our existing identity or identities. Thereby, we are faced with the promise or the possibility of becoming increasingly more committed to those identities, leading, potentially, to fundamentalism, neo-tribalism and a self-righteous and narcissistic intolerance of difference in others. (2022, p. 286)

Although Bagnall and Hodge (2022) suggest an ethics of authenticity can entail respect for others to pursue their own projects, this concession does not extend to the kind of activism and deployment required to critique or interrupt violence taking place elsewhere and in relation to projects we may disavow. For the national or international groundswell necessary to question humanitarian calamities of war, an ethics of authenticity does not necessarily bode well.

However, the social sciences and adult education literature that informed the arguments of Bagnall and Hodge (2022) is woven through with acknowledgements of the fundamental need for the freedom required to enable our authenticity. Our own and others' projects can only play out against a background of liberty. The groundwork of our freedom, though, was built on foundations laid under the signs of other paradigms. The emancipatory paradigm, in particular, as it consolidated in modernity, forms the foundation in many cases of our being able to choose and engage in life projects. Given that contemporary adult and lifelong education still bear the potentialities of previously dominant paradigms (noting that newer paradigms in this field do not necessarily exclude others even if tensions ensue), it may be that this educational field still has something to offer lifelong learning as the enabling field of authenticity.

Noting that lifelong education does have different possibilities to lifelong learning (Billett, 2010), even if the latter serves the pursuit of individualist projects, the *educational* project can reclaim the consciousness of what is at stake if freedom is threatened anywhere. Adult and lifelong educators might have an important role to play at this juncture of history in supplying the insights, provocations and wherewithal to inform a lifelong learning that sensitises adherents of the emerging paradigm to the need to maintain freedom as a condition of authenticity, and that this freedom is always wider than any project we can imagine or occupy since our enjoyment of the possibility of envisaging, testing or adopting new projects can only take place in the space of possibilities granted and guaranteed by freedom. Bagnall and Hodge (2022) do not make this call, but if we are to enjoy the promises of a new paradigm of reflexivity and authenticity, then there is another responsibility we have to secure freedom for all. If, as they say, lifelong learning is the platform for this new paradigm, then it is perhaps lifelong education that holds the keys to its longevity by shaping lifelong learning so that alongside the attractions of authenticity, its preconditions in freedom are not forgotten.

Vale John Field

During preparation of this editorial, we learned with great sadness and share here with our readership that John Field – Emeritus Professor of Education at University of Stirling – died on Monday, 25th March 2024. John's contribution to the scholarship of Lifelong Education was outstanding, and his critical mind was first rate. He was a highly valued colleague and friend to some of the past and current editors and a long-standing member of the Advisory Board of this journal. The editorial team mourns his loss.

Disclosure statement

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