Active citizenship and late-life learning in the community

Issue 2/2013

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Introduction

In an age where the official, adult-education component of lifelong learning is dominated by the discourse of employability and performativity, reclaiming the radical agenda of critical, adult, active citizenship is not only urgent but indispensable for morally sound and democratically viable societies. The crisis in capitalism is showing us, adult educators, that unless adult education is employed to interrogate, challenge and resist the accesses of a system that privileges profit at all cost, rampant individualism and privatisation of social goods, it will reproduce asymmetrical and predatory, social economic relations. This paper problematises dominant notions of active citizenship in later life and provides a framework for an alternative view of active citizenship. It also illustrates how adult educators can facilitate learning processes where late-life learners, reflect on the impact of the neoliberal value system and on the consequences of its hegemonic practices on personal and community life, before engaging in transformative action.

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Education for Critical Active Citizenship

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Education for Critical Active Citizenship (ECAC) is based on the understanding that there is no education outside the social realm (Sarracino, 2011) and, therefore, a critical reading of the social and economic realities is fundamental to competent and effective citizenship. ECAC is urgent in a world that is becoming increasingly polarised, exploitative, individualistic and culturally invasive. ECAC challenges and resists the imposition of 'monolithic thought' (Fisher & Ponniah, 2003, cited in Ledwith, 2005), generated through an increasingly standardized educational scenario that is characterised by uniform, transnational expectations and assessment procedures, and by a global obsession with vocationalism and credentialism (Borg & Mayo, 2006).

ECAC subverts the corporate notion of education by privileging the political, critical, community and collective over the excessively competitive, private and apolitical (sic). ECAC is neither a neutral nor an objective educational endeavour. On the contrary, in adopting a social justice approach to understanding the world, the foregoing education process is consciously subjective, albeit honest and fair, in interrogating various forms of oppression, injustices and inequalities. Ultimately, ECAC is committed to acting on the knowledge that is collectively produced as a result of the reflexive process, turning the moments of consciousness building into opportunities for resistance and transformation. ECAC is local without degenerating into the parochial, and transnational without losing sight of the context, where citizens can renegotiate social, economic and cultural relations.

ECAC is essentially a moral and ethical project. Grounded in the immediate material world of the adult learner and, therefore, of direct relevance to the learner's present predicament, its fundamental aim is to reclaim the right to dream of a different material world; a world where citizenship is active and expressed in critical as well as possibilitarian terms. In view of ECAC's potential as a vehicle for social change, community (read as the citizens' lived reality) is conceived as the best pedagogical context to unlock adults' reflexive potential. Authentic dialogue (Freire, 1970, 1973, 1998) based on mutual trust, respect, active listening and participation, is considered as the most appropriate pedagogical tool to affirm the reflexive worth of all citizens. Rather than conceiving of adult citizens as cynical recipients of knowledge, the central pedagogical thrust of ECAC lies in the recognition of citizens as intellectuals and co-producers of social knowledge; active citizens who can analyse, interpret and reinvent their communities.

The role of the educator in ECAC is central. Promoters of ECAC are conscious of the dangers of the 'expert' educator colonizing, consciously or unconsciously, the 'unexpert' or deficient other (sic.). ECAC goes against the hegemonic practice of selling answers, quick solutions and perceived worthwhile knowledge through traditional pedagogies. Instead, ECAC invites educators, in Ledwith's (2005, 31) words, "to create contexts for questioning" that help adult educatees-educators, "to make critical connections between their lives and the structures of society that shape their world". ECAC encourages interrogation and theory formation on the part of adult educatees, in a process of consciousness building led by educators who are prepared to affirm, without celebrating uncritically, people's histories, narratives, auto-biographies, cultures, wisdoms, intuition and experiential knowledges.

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Active citizenship in later life

Debates about the meaning of active citizenship in later life have taken a ubiquitous character as modern societies witnessed an unprecedented growth of older adults in their communities.

The definition of the terms 'later life' and 'older adults' has always been an enormous bone of contention. This is because physiological manifestations of biological ageing occur at diverse rates in different people, with the result that members of older cohorts are considerably varied in terms of senescence. Chronological age has no 'innate' meaning but is derived from the social and historical meaning of specific geographical contexts which, of course, may vary substantially. Whilst birthdays are only useful in making sense and ordering large sets of quantifiable data, and as such, it tells researchers nothing about how it feels to be old. Hence, we agree with Findsen & Formosa's (2011, 11) preference for a lifecycle standpoint and propose the following working definition of older adults as

> *"people, whatever their chronological age, who are post-work and post-family, in the sense that they are less or no longer involved in an occupational career or with the major responsibilities for raising a family".*

As the European Union (EU) became increasingly preoccupied with the decreasing average age at which persons exited from the labour force into retirement, so that by 2060 there will only be two persons of working age (15-64 years old) for every person aged 65-plus, 'productive' rationales eclipsed 'activity' and 'successful' foundations for active citizenship in later life. Arguing that the participation of older workers in the workforce is vital to the development of

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socially inclusive economies and the reduction of the risk of social exclusion among the older population, the EU issued directives calling for employment policies to discourage older workers from leaving the workforce and the development incentives to stay in work (Commission of the Economic Communities, 2004). The argument runs as follows:

> *"Welfare systems are thought to be under strain - both financially and in terms of management. Demographic ageing increases this strain. The solution to this problem is to initiate policy reform that brings about longer working lives. In parallel, the services/benefits supplied by the welfare systems should be limited and/or individual contributions should be increased."* (Directorate General for Research, European Commission, 2005, 25)

Evidence that the EU hinges the defining characteristic of active citizenship upon one's ability to engage in paid work is found in two separate quarters. First, social policy discourse in the EU hinges the ability to maintain a high quality of social welfare provision upon the success of enabling older people to remain full participants in the labour market (Directorate General for Research, European Commission, 2005). Secondly, the EU's extensive drive to improve the e-learning skills of older adults - also weaving itself through Grundtvig-funded projects in late-life learning - is, ultimately, nothing more than a response to 'skills crisis' in information and communication technology (ICT) amongst older cohorts.

As Borg & Mayo (2005) point out, the net result of this hysteria around e-skilling is an increase in public financing of private needs in an area of human resources that is crucial to latter-day capitalism, so that private and public interests and concerns are slowly becoming one. In presenting productive ageing as the key strategy in achieving active citizenship in later life, welfare regimes make the error of presiding active citizenship as attainable only through economic activity or other types of activity for which there is a market. Employability has become a major determinant of a person's worth, where "in order to be active citizens, people have to be labourers contributing to the common good" (Jarvis, 2008, 46).

A critical lens finds such assumptions to be fallacious on three key grounds.

First, such a position serves to maintain the inequities of the status quo by providing homogenised models of ageing that emphasise individual responsibility rather than structural inequalities that may serve as obstacles in their efforts to reach an 'idealized old age' (Estes et al., 2003). Indeed, hinging active citizenship upon 'economic usefulness' is, to put it mildly, a troubling model considering the various ways that the market economy penalises and discriminates against older adults.

Second, such an economic model is especially disquieting with respect to vulnerable sectors within the older population, but especially older women, who have traditionally carried the unacknowledged burden of care-giving responsibilities throughout their lives. As Holstein (1999, 370) asserted, stressing 'economic' productivity may "impose negative value on those who are not productive in the traditional sense or who do not maintain youthful vigour...[or] who have physical and mental impairments". A dynamic way forward - one that is both empowering and sensitive to the realms of later life - is ensuring that active citizenship is premised upon a wider understanding of productive ageing. Questions must be asked as what activities are included in the definition of active ageing: "If paid work and volunteering are included...what about house cleaning? What about listening to music? What about taking a lifelong learning course?" (Bass, 2011, 179). Undoubtedly, productive ageing also encompasses other nonmarket activities like long-term care giving, grandparenting, and other activities that enrich societal and community well-being, as personal welfare. Bass (2011) asserts that a productive ageing society

> *...reflects the values of a community that seeks policies that enable all of its citizens to continue to live productive and rewarding lives as they choose. By engaging older and expanding the availability and opportunity to participate in significant societal roles, their talent, experience, and insights would be retained or even maximized; the overall society would benefit from their participation and generations would appreciate the value of each other across age lines* (Bass, 2011, 181).

Thirdly, at the same time, political activism cannot remain overlooked in promotions of active citizenship. As Theiss-Morse & Hibbing (2005) underline, ignoring the value of political participation reinforces a trend among the citizenry to shy away from political participation and replaces efforts to create systematic change upstream with one-to-one efforts downstream. This is because whilst community service of every sort is valuable, localised efforts will not address the societal ills that many civic engagement proponents suggest they will (Martinson, 2007). Indeed, "volunteering in a soup kitchen will help hungry individuals in a town but will do nothing to address broader problems of homelessness and poverty" (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005, 238). Bearing in mind the potential of education to bring about higher levels of personal and social empowerment, there can be no doubt of the potential of late-life learning towards an improved engagement of older persons in the civic life of their communities (Jelenc Krašovec &Kump, 2009).

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2007, 38)

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> *"confirm[s] that lifelong learning and active ageing, access to modern information and communication technologies, volunteerism and civic engagement, are crucial means to promote participation".*

Programmes of late-life learning which seek to encourage civic engagement in later life have expanded significantly in recent years (Hennessy, 2010). Most initiatives stemmed from a critical scepticism about the reality of older persons to continue working up to retirement (Wilson et al., 2005). Whilst research indicates that less than a quarter of retirees may be expected to do any work with pay during their retirement, the types of low-paying, lower-prestige, jobs that are currently a primary source of employment for retirees will not be so attractive to incoming cohorts. This prompts a call for a reengineering of opportunities for older adults to engage in active citizenship.

It was against such an epistemological backdrop that we planned and coordinated two critical learning projects for older adults, both of which aimed to act as a catalyst for improved levels of active citizenship in later life.

Like Walters & Watters (2001), we do not believe that late-life learning is automatically a 'good thing'. Rather than as a mechanism to increasing the efficiency of the marketplace, we only perceive its value as a means to enhance active democratic citizenship which

> "*connects individuals and groups to the structures of social, political and economic activity in both local and global contexts…[and] highlights women and men as agents of their own history in all aspects of their lives"* (UNESCO, 1998, 1).

Indeed, both learning projects emerged from our perceived need for major pedagogical and organisational social changes to address the conventional exclusion of older adults from civic engagement and active citizenship. However, this is not the same as saying that we were oblivious of empirical research noting how with advancing age individuals generally experience more intense feelings of cosmic union which lead them to redefine earlier conceptions of time, space, life and death (Sherman, 2010). As studies on gerotranscendence highlight, older persons become more selective in the choice of social and other activities, whilst feeling increased affinity with past generations and decreased interest in superfluous interaction (Tornstam, 2005). In fact, we discussed at length Nye's (1998) and one of the author's (Formosa, 2012) reflective accounts of critical educational programmes in later life, both of which results only in average levels of critical consciousness amongst older learners, with a view of learning from other's and our own errors in practical critical pedagogy in later life. Our concluding inference was that both works adopted a too 'modernistic' interpretation of Freire's ideology, one which emphasises a dialogical split between the oppressed (the participants) and 'oppressors' (the status quo). Embracing Freire's (1998) belief that educational trials cannot be transplanted but only reinvented, much energy was spent in the consideration of how late-life learning targets the energy levels and interests of a cohort of persons who are neither looking for work nor raising a family, and who may be more preoccupied with their physical limitations than the average middle-aged adult. The following sections report and reflect on the two projects.

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Critical active citizenship and late-life learning: Merging critical literacy and e-competence

The project Critical literacy, e-competence and later life stemmed from our commitment to utilise programmes in late-life learning as catalysts for improved levels of active citizenship amongst older adults in the community. The rationale for such a programme emerged from the fact that whilst pedagogies of adult learning are often divorced from issues of community participation, those that do explicitly link learning, community participation and social cohesion rarely focus on older adults (Etienne & Jackson, 2011).

Specific aims informing our programme included: (i) exploring older adults' engagement as active citizens; (ii) investigating the potential of lifelong learning in later life towards the promotion of active citizenship; and (iii), leading older adults towards higher levels of active citizenship in their community.

A significant objective of the learning programme was to increase the e-competence of older adults as a means to engage in political activism in their community. On the basis of one of the author's ongoing volunteering work with the Ħad-Dingli Local Council, setting the late-life learning programme in this locality was from the outset our preferred option.

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The location

Ħad-Dingli is a rural settlement on the west coast of Malta, with a population of 3,495 persons (2011), of whom 25 per cent aged 55-plus (National Statistics Office, 2012). Malta is a micro-state located in the Mediterranean Sea with Sicily 93 km to the north, Africa 288 km to the south, Gibraltar 1,826 km to the west and Alexandria 1,510 km to the east. In 2011, the total population of Malta was 416,055 - 127,311 of whom were aged 55 and above (30.6 per cent) (ibid.).

Dingli is located on Western coast of Malta.

Photo: Wikipedia

A meeting was held with Ħad-Dingli's Mayor who immediately offered to host the project and any logistic assistance that we might have needed. The Local Council announced the learning programme, declaring that any resident older than 50 years was welcome to attend. Seven persons registered and attended the course, with ages ranging from early to late sixties. The project lasted five months, between July and November 2012, with the e-literacy and e-competence sessions being coordinated by a graduate teacher in ICT. Sessions took place once a week and lasted two hours.

This late-life learning programme was inspired throughout by Paulo Freire's (1970, 1985) philosophy of education. As Findsen (2007) underlines, many of Freire's concepts and principles have direct applicability for older adult learners who take on their own leadership for social purposes since his ideas challenge prevailing orthodoxies and provide a robust analytical framework from which radical educators can work. On a pedagogical plane, we followed Brookfield's (2005) advice to perceive ourselves as facilitators of a co-directed (teacher and learner) process that aids adult learners to explore a diversity of perspectives, recognises and investigates taken-for-granted assumptions, develop an appreciation for differences, affirm adult participants as co-creators of knowledge, and thereby, assisting transformation. In planning the project, our first step was to engage in a reflective exercise, contemplating upon the possible strategies of linking late-life learning with active citizenship. To this effect, we generated a number of grounded themes that directly reflected and impacted on the daily life of participants, namely: capitalism, globalisation, social exclusion, income security, disability, and alternative housing.

A preliminary meeting with participants was organised to discuss such 'generative themes' so as to keep with the principle that critical learning can only occur

> "*via a negotiated curriculum between learners and teachers which allows for learning outcomes to emerge so that learners and teachers engage together in new possibilities and de/re/ constructions of knowledge"* (Burke & Jackson, 2007, p.176).

This resulted in a very productive session whereby participants were aided to recognise their own voices, and on our part to see whether we overlooked any generative themes relevant to daily living in later life. In particular, it helped us steer the learning programme towards a more rigorous exploration of questions relating to the relationship between social class and gender on one hand, and civic engagement and active citizenship on the other. It was precisely during this session that we chartered a way to embed the learning sessions in a praxeological dimension, one that bridges 'reflection' with 'action', through an e-manifesto for intergenerational solidarity for the Ħad-Dingli community.

The learning programme exemplified the increasing complexity of rural ageing in an epoch of

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globalised capitalism. The project highlighted how in the conditions of late capitalism, growing older is becoming a more social, reflexive, and managed process, notably in the relationship between the individual, the state and a range of public as well as private services. On this front, the learning programme generated four key themes. First, learners discussed how living in a world where nations are no longer in total control of their destiny, as international governmental organisations, ranging from the World Bank to the World Trade Organisation, have assumed the role of influential policy and economic drivers.

Secondly, participants became aware that modern societies are witnessing the emergence of a more aggressive form of capitalism, one that contrasts with the more controlled and regulated capitalism of the 1950s and 1960s.

Third, that after a period of equity due to improved levels of social protection, we are witnessing an increase in older persons who experience at-risk-of-poverty lifestyles. Indeed, in the early years of the 21st century, about 13 million people aged 65-plus are at risk of poverty in 25 European Union Member States, amounting to as many as one-in-six of all 74 million elderly people living in the EU (Zaidi, 2010). And finally, social and health care services are increasingly driven by a market-based approach that is leading to the erosion of the welfare state on which many people depend and, as a result, the exacerbation of existing inequalities.

As we directed the participants to focus more deeply on issues relating to the barriers that older adults face in engaging in active citizenship, it became increasingly clear that civic engagement is a contested area defined by social class, gender and age. Echoing Marshall's (1950) classic arguments in "Citizenship and social class and other essays", learners highlighted how citizens from working-class backgrounds are generally excluded from participation in decision-making procedures in the community. This occurs as committees in Local Councils are generally composed of individuals with elevated levels of economic, cultural, and social capital. This left the participants, all of a working-class background, feeling powerless as to the development of their communities, having limited to no say as what is decided and occurs in their community.

Moreover, it was evident that older women's attempts to attain equitable participation in civic engagement is hampered by a range of structural social inequalities. These ranged from lesser access to citizenship rights, including financial and educational resources, as well as less support and fewer opportunities to attain positions of power and authority within government, industry, religious and educational institutions. The fact that most women continue to carry disproportionately greater burdens of unpaid (caring and domestic) labour continues to exacerbate the exclusion from active citizenship.

Finally, one could not fail to notice the claims of participants as how their efforts in engaging in active citizenship were thwarted by ageism and age discrimination which lead to prejudiced attitudes, actions and societal marginalisation. Such attitudes function to both disadvantage and devalue older people, and hence, providing a covert rationale for their exclusion from community participation and active citizenship. The result is that policies targeting the interests of older persons are estranged from the language of citizenship and implemented in a patronising manner to a poor, deserving, population sector.

Informally, participants reported various personal and social benefits experienced by participants as the result of e-literacy sessions. In brief, the acquisition of knowledge and skills in ICT helped participants to develop a sense of efficacy and achievement. The learning of such skills also helped participants to network around social issues. Far from coming across as an example of banking education, the learning project in question subverted hegemonic resistance by opening new spaces for critical reflection and action. E-literacy sessions enabled the participants to improve their levels of e-competence, as a means to engage in improved levels of active citizenship, by participating in cyber-communication with the goal of producing a Manifesto for Intergenerational Solidarity for the Ħad-Dingli Community, the project's legacy. The Manifesto advocated the Ħad-Dingli Local Authority to set up

- a committee whose goal is the creation of a structure for active ageing community;
- a local strategy and vision for active ageing in the community;
- improvement in the infrastructure to improve older adults' access and mobility;
- better primary care services in the health centre that combines educational and medical services;
- wide ranging educational projects that strengthen the participation and visibility of older adults;
- improvements in the public transport services to and from Ħad-Dingli;
- better dialogue between local councils, government, and non-governmental organisations to improve services in the community and establish alternative types of accommodation;
- improved opportunities for older adults to participate in voluntary work;
- visiting services to former residents in residential/nursing homes in other villages and town;
- more opportunities for inter-generational experiences that strengthen solidarity between people of different ages.

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This learning project provides further evidence that older adults can benefit substantially from non-formal learning as part of a fulfilling and active retirement. More important, however, is its strong confirmation that active citizenship is a contested space. As Etienne and Jackson (2011, 53) underline,

> *"it can exclude as well as include and depends on... discursive practices as to who may be a member, with the resultant rights and obligations, and who may not".*

Citizenship is far from being class-, gender-, and age-neutral. Whilst there have been several critiques of 'citizenship' located in a male public arena which pays scant attention to women's so-called 'private' work in the home (ibid.), a focus on that interface between social class and age on one hand, and active citizenship on the other is less well-developed (Higgs & Formosa, in print). This project substantiated the assumption, long-held by critical educators and gerontologists alike, that social class, gender, and age determine the levels of direct or indirect involvement of members in a community in decision-making process and activities that affect the development and well-being of their community. As Cairns (2003, 112) argues, community participation can be described as "an uneasy shifting process involving ambiguous relationships and motives that reflect inequalities of power and resources". Freirean pedagogy, however, offers a possibility to enact learning programmes that support and promote active citizenship and community participation. Late-life learning promotes community participation, which is vital in helping older adults avoid social exclusion.

Carmel Borg (l) and Marvin Formosa in action during an adult education session at Dingli.

Photo: Glorianne Portelli

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Critical active citizenship and late-life learning: Critical literacy and cultural actions

Similar to the Ħad-Dingli project, this adult-education experience responded to Freire's (1985) call to reinvent him in our context. One of us, together with a part-time colleague from the University of Malta, set out to develop a community project that was framed by the ECAC value system discussed earlier.

In specific terms, the ethical and pedagogical principles that informed this project included: (i) participants' knowledge, experiences, narratives and biographies should be acknowledged and affirmed; (ii) the education process should address the real and immediate needs of the adult participants; (iii) participants should be perceived as co-producers of knowledge; (iv) participants should ideally be involved in all stages of the teaching-learning process; (v) the themes for the project's content should ideally be generated from the participants' life history; (vi) ongoing reflection should be embedded into the teaching-learning process; (vii) the education process is understood as a multi-way series of learning events based on mutual respect, trust and understanding.

This means that the education process is meant to empower and transform all those involved in the teaching-learning process; and (vii), the education process should acknowledge the socio-emotional-economic-cultural complexity that informs the group.

In sharp contrast with Ħad-Dingli, Żejtun, where this project took place, is urban and predominantly working-class. The well-kept town betrays a cocktail of social challenges that range from illiteracy and unemployment to housing problems. While highlighting the role of popular education in empowering people, the Żejtun project illustrated how adults with different levels of functional literacy can co-interrogate their common world and relive their stories

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critically. This project of possibility could materialise because its seven participants were able to move safely from personal narratives to collective memories. In fact, excavating memories from personal and collective biographies, and linking them to present-day, immediate realities, constituted the running pedagogical theme of the project.

A pedagogy based on personal biographies in a small, closely-knit and intimate community is not an easy task to accomplish. What worked in this particular project is the fact that both of us, adult educators, pronounced our working-class origins; an autobiographical fact that resonated well with and was greatly appreciated by the mostly working-class, adult educatees. This fact sent a strong message that the project was not another academic exercise in data gathering but a genuine process of co-liberation. As adult educators we opened our narratives for participants' observation and commentary; an act that generated trust and respect. In addition, rather than posing as connoisseurs of social reality, throughout the sessions we engaged authoritatively with the adult participants, foregrounding listening and avoiding one-way, authoritarian pronouncements on their past and present realities. In fact, dialogue featured prominently throughout the sessions.

The one-and-a-half-hour sessions consisted of a first part that allowed for reflections on the theme developed in the previous session. Participants were encouraged to use poetry, prose and folk singing to express their thoughts and emotions. In the second part, a new generative theme was introduced and dialogue developed around it. One could notice that the participants were not only intellectually but also emotionally involved in the dialogues, since most of the themes were directly relevant to their personal histories. Themes discussed during the sessions included: social-class and educational achievement; industrial memory and workers' emancipation; globalisation and the neoliberal value system; the social media; health and safety issues; and environment issues and the community. At the end of the project, the local council hosted a cultural evening where participants shared their reflections on the aforementioned themes with other members of the community, using poems, prose and folk singing as the media of expression.

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Conclusion

This paper calls for a rethinking of the role of adult education in promoting active citizenship. It affirms the concept of critical active citizenship through late-life learning that privileges adults' critical engagement with the social and economic world. Two projects mentioned in this paper underscore the importance of Education for Critical Active Citizenship (ECAC) as a medium to reskill citizens in a historical moment that calls for the collective delegitimization of asymmetrical social relations. Rooted in community, ECAC deprivileges the economistic view of adult education and, instead, foregrounds dialogues that lead to transformative action.

On the basis of our direct experience with ECAC projects, we can claim that empowering programmes in late-life learning have the potential to stimulate social capital, and community cohesion and inclusion. Contrary to other reflective accounts on critical learning in later life, both projects were successful in sparking the interest of older adults in engaging in active citizenship.

There is no doubt that there is a key role for university academics to play in linking retirees and older adults to learning programmes that resurrect their civic engagement. If conducted appropriately, ECAC projects can surely be successful in overcoming the increasing tendency of older adults to shy away from the domain of activism, critique and utopia. This occurs as critical curricula have much potential to promote social learning, building social capital, fostering collective identities, finding common purpose, embracing participation, working with social movements, and above all, influencing policy. As a result, participants go through a process of developing their knowledge about a wide range of issues, alternating between roles of 'experts' and 'novices', as they learn from and teach each other, drawing on and developing learning from experience (Etienne & Jackson, 2011).

Critical adult curricula promote critical self awareness and collective consciousness, two important characteristics of active citizenship for transformation. However, for this to occur educators must not rest on the customary curricula and should think out of the box as how elder lives may be motivated to engage in unique learning processes. In our case, it was a case of ensuring that two learning programmes develop critical e-literacy skills during a period of complex and conflicting online information, and viewing the working-classness of participants as a resource when most conventional learning settings treats such a background as a hindrance to leaning.

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