

Adult education in times of crisis and change: perspectives on access, learning careers and identities

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This book is dedicated *in memoriam*
of our colleagues and friends
Henrique M.A.C. Fonseca and Joaquim Luís Coimbra

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Introduction

This book emerges from a conference held at the University of Algarve in Faro, Portugal, in July 2022 by the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) Access, Learning Careers and Identities Network. Researchers from across Europe came to discuss and share ideas about adult education in times of crisis and change. In 2022 the world was still immersed in a global period of change and crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the theme of the conference reflected this situation. However, it was not the first time the network's conference has focused on change in adult education.

Looking back at the 2013 conference of the network in Linköping, Sweden, the theme was 'Times of Change: The role of adult education in times of crisis'. The notion of 'times of change' has become relevant again as a result of the pandemic and its effects on adult education, and the lives of both adult students and adult educators. Issues of crisis and change, therefore, emerge over time albeit in a different context.

A History of the Network

As stated above, the network is part of ESREA. ESREA is a research society, it was established to provide a European-wide forum for researchers engaged in adult education research and learning, and to promote disseminate theoretical and empirical research in the field. Since its launch, in 1991, the landscape of adult education and learning has changed to include more diverse learning contexts at both formal and informal levels. At the same time there

has been a policy push by the European Union, OECD, UNESCO, and national governments to promote the policy and practice of lifelong learning. ESREA provides an important space for discussion and reflection of these changes and a (re)definition of adult education and learning in relation to research, theory, policy, and practice. This takes place at the triennial conference, network conferences and through the publication of books and RELA journal.

The ESREA Access, Learning Careers and Identity Network was established in 1996 and a first UK network conference was held at the University of Leeds. At that time the network was called the Access Network, reflecting the focus of adult education research at that time. The conference book publication entitled *Participation and Organisational Change* (Hill & Merrill, 1997) illuminates the narrow theme of the network, however, at that time it only addressed access and participation in higher education. The network convenors were Chris Duke, Etienne Bourgeois, and Barbara Merrill. This focus of the network continued to dominate the following two network conferences at the University of Barcelona and the University of Edinburgh. Subsequent network conferences (held every two years) were located again at the University of Barcelona, Spain (2000), then Louvain University, Belgium (2006), University of Seville, Spain (2008), University of Aveiro, Portugal (2011), University of Linköping, Sweden (2013), University of Seville, Spain (2015), University of Rennes, France (2017) and University of Coimbra, Portugal (2019).

Ten years after the network started, and to the changing nature of European adult education research and literature, which was moving beyond research on access and participation to other wider concerns and concepts, the network name was changed to Access, Learning Careers and Identity. The narrow focus was thus widened from just accessing and getting into an institution to experiences of learning in a wider range of educational contexts, such as further and higher education, community education, vocational learning, and informal learning. Importantly the network also explores the impact of biography and lifelong learning in shaping learning careers and how this process may result in a changing self and identity. This raises issues of agency and structure and their interaction by taking into

account the socio-economic position in which adult learners are located and the actions that they take to develop their learner identity and career within a particular educational setting. In doing so the network examines the different conceptual approaches to understanding learning careers and learning identities. The network provides a forum for adult educators from a range of disciplines to discuss, debate and share these issues. Over the years participants have come from beyond Europe such as Canada, Brazil, Australia, and South Africa. The network is now convened by three convenors: Barbara Merrill, University of Warwick, UK, Andrea Galimberti, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, and António Fragoso, University of Algarve, Portugal.

The chapters in this book reflect and extend on the ideas of changing times, transformation, access, learning approaches and identity. The authors discuss the immense impact that the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has had on adult education, communities, and society more widely. The chapters explore the consequences of these changes on adult education and the resultant experiences for students and adult educators. More broadly many countries have experienced an intense economic crisis, an increase in unemployment, extensive changes in the working world, and an increase in social inequalities and poverty as a result of the pandemic. It has also resulted in specific changes in higher education policies, practices, and other spheres of adult education, with the intensification of debates regarding learning and teaching using distance instruments and digital teaching and the effects that this has had on learning as a social process.

This crisis has also changed access to adult education, and the learning and teaching approaches and experiences of learning as face-to-face teaching has been temporarily lost and replaced by digital teaching and distance learning in all forms of adult education (community education, further and higher education, work-based learning). This has raised both old and new issues about learning and teaching as the experiences of adult students have been transformed, especially regarding learning as a social experience. Having to teach remotely and digitally has also significantly changed the teaching experiences of adult educators. The mandatory use

of online platforms during the pandemic resulted in the possibility to record lessons and offer an 'asynchronous' learning experience. On the one hand, this situation has given non-traditional students, with children at home or working full-time jobs, the possibility to have online materials for accessing at a time which suited them. It gave them an expanded learning space that was not available in a non-pandemic situation. This chance was, in some ways, 'more' than what they could afford in a non-pandemic situation.

On the other hand, the lack of face-to-face social relationships and interaction caused a series of side effects that are not yet completely outlined and analysed. First, we know that relationships and social networks were lost as these play an important role in the learning trajectories of these students (Finnegan et al., 2014) and are crucial to the building and diversity of social capital (Field, 2000, 2005). So, we may raise different questions on this front. Is this opportunity still a possibility in an online learning environment? Is this possible with online learning or is it related only to face-to-face teaching in an educational institution? Some of the authors in this book explore these issues.

On another side, periods of confinement due to the new conditions in higher education and adult education more generally might also affect women and men differently, both students and educators alike. It is important to ask the following questions: Did gender inequalities increase during the crisis in which we are living and how has this affected their learning and teaching experiences, family, and community lives? If so, what and how can we combat this through adult education? What impact did the new way of learning had on class, race, age and disability inequalities, as well as the issues of access, learning careers and learning identities?

The changes towards digital learning might also change the teaching experiences of adult educators. How did they change their professional practices in order to maintain their commitment to enhance people's opportunities and learning within these new limitations and constraints?

Finally, the pandemic situation also had an impact for scholars researching issues of access, learning careers and identity leading to new dimensions in relation to research topics and methodologies.

Reflecting on past and current situations, we would like to project to the future possibilities and implications and changes for adult education. What can we learn as adult educators and researchers from across Europe and beyond?

The following section provides an outline of the fourteen chapters in this book. Ted Fleming begins the book with his chapter entitled *Toward a transformative pedagogy of crises and experience*. The author delves into the transformative learning opportunities that emerge during crises, emphasising the experience of disorientation. It explores the concepts of crisis, experience, and work, applying Oskar Negt's critical theory of adult education and drawing from philosophers like John Dewey. The chapter centres on the dialectical concept of experience, rooted in the traditions of Hegel and Negt, influencing the understanding of learning, transformative pedagogy, and adult education. The chapter concludes by outlining implications for teaching.

Laura Formenti, in the second chapter entitled *On systemic reflexivity, consciousness and students' voices*, discusses using dialogic pedagogy in higher education to foster creative and critical learning. It focuses on assessing students' reflexive capacity through reflective essays, exploring differences between reflection and reflexivity. The author challenges potential elitism in the concept of reflexivity, emphasising the need for freedom and openness in students' voices. Analysis of students' assignments, using Gilligan's Listening Guide, aims to assess reflexivity while celebrating individual voices.

Julita Pieńkosz, Marta Petelewicz and Joanna Stankowska in the third chapter entitled *Mature students in the secondary education – motivations, process of learning and benefits*, investigate the decision-making process of adult learners in formal secondary education in Poland, emphasising motivation, expectations, and fears. It explores characteristics of the educational process, obstacles faced, and support received by mature students. Despite high motivation and dedication, the study highlights that the patterns of functioning in adult secondary schools often replicate those of compulsory education. The institution and teachers do not adjust to the needs and capabilities of the participants. Although engaging in secondary education brings satisfaction, expands skills, and empowers students, the

findings underscore the need to better align formal education institutions with the needs of adult learners.

Evolution of lifelong learning and M23 students at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave in Portugal by Ricardo Simões and Natália Rego is the title of the fourth chapter. It addresses the pressing need for lifelong learning in higher education, emphasising its importance for social inclusion, active citizenship, and employment rates. The chapter focuses on the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave's (IPCA) recent changes in student evaluation regulations to admit candidates over 23 years old based on various criteria, reflecting a commitment to re-skilling and up-skilling. The paper outlines IPCA's current plans for lifelong learning programmes, considering labour market transformations and emerging job requirements. Ongoing challenges include managing diverse student profiles, optimising class performance in remote and digital teaching, and implementing measures for success among older students.

The fifth chapter focuses on non-traditional students aged over 23 (NTS23) entering a Portuguese University. The chapter is written by Henrique M. A. C. Fonseca and Lucília Santos and is entitled *Social environmental changes influence on the profile of mature students in higher education: An exploratory study*. This chapter explores their unique responses to crises, such as economic downturns or the COVID-19 pandemic, which differ from traditional students. During the COVID-19 lockdown, online surveys were conducted with NTS23 to assess their learning experiences, challenges, and with teachers to gauge their perception of NTS23 adjustment to distance learning. University databases were analysed for sociodemographic and academic changes in NTS23 profiles. The study aims to understand student success and improve the connection between their academic experiences and real-life challenges.

Samantha Broadhead is the author of the sixth chapter entitled *Learning Returns: Experiences of mature students in art and design captured through YouTube*. The Learning Returns project initiated in response to the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, focuses on capturing the experiences of

mature students studying art and design in a specialist arts institution in the North of England. The project aims to investigate how former art and design students communicate with prospective students considering a return to education outside formal institutions. Participants share their stories through filmed interviews, where they exhibit confidence, take control of content, and contribute to aesthetics. Identified themes include reflections on learning journeys, connecting past experiences with learning, understanding positionality, encouraging others, and envisioning future projects beyond education.

The seventh chapter from France delves into the role of adult education and research in an ever-changing world, emphasising the involvement of adult learners, facilitators, and researchers. It is written by Anne-Gaëlle Dorval, Eric Bertrand, and Jérôme Eneau, and is entitled *The social and cultural issues revolving around changes in the workplace and in training: the place, and changing face, of research in the field of adult education*. The chapter analyses crises in work, training, and research, presenting a multi-referential grid and theoretical approach to understanding transformation. The research-action training approach reveals a cooperative and transformative model. Insights from experiences during the COVID-19 crisis showcases the transformation of professional practices, researcher support, and changes in learners' profiles and practices.

Ana Cristina Lopes and Maria Natália Ramos are the authors of the eighth chapter entitled *Educational and cultural challenges: Digital technologies in higher education*. Their chapter is prompted by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, addresses the shift to digital technologies and its effects on students, emphasising the disparities in distance learning on higher education. Through interviews with teachers and an online survey, the study aims to uncover positive and negative aspects, contributing insights for the evolution of education. The chapter underscores the necessity for adaptive, inclusive methodologies to address unforeseen circumstances and promote cultural diversity in Portuguese higher education.

In *Postcards from the Edge: Developing a professional identity for trainee teachers in English education* (chapter nine), Carol Thompson and Elaine

Battams explore the impact of post-compulsory education de-regulation in England, focusing on the challenges faced by pre-service trainees in developing professional identities, especially exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employs focus groups and reflections from teachers trained during the pandemic to highlight obstacles to identity formation. Results illuminate strategies taken by trainees to navigate the journey from trainee to fully-fledged teacher.

The tenth chapter entitled *Through the looking glass: Professional identity during a pandemic* by Neil Hopkins and Carol Thompson explores the meaning of the professional identity of educators compared to other fields. Using a narrative approach, participants engage in an auto reflection to analyse their professional identity, considering cultural and environmental factors. The study, based in the UK, focuses on the challenges faced by teachers and leaders in the transition to virtual classrooms, impacting skills, roles, policies, and infrastructure. Initial findings reveal the sector's fragility and resilience, signalling a shift where previous certainties are no longer definitive.

The pandemic and disorienting narratives of old age by Micaela Castiglioni (chapter eleven) addresses the oversight of the emotional, social, and relational impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on the elderly and adolescents. It emphasises the need to investigate and raise awareness of the long-term consequences of such emergencies, aiming to prepare for future situations. The author critiques the inadequacy of relying solely on social isolation in the absence of institutional assistance, highlighting the resulting marginalisation and unequal treatment among different age groups. It specifically examines the delayed implementation of health and safety measures in care homes, emphasising the neglect of the elderly during the pandemic.

The twelfth chapter, entitled *Effects of the pandemic on the Roma community of Cerro do Bruxo*, by Aurora Coelho and Cláudio Garcia, explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a vulnerable Roma community, in Portugal, and the intervention of social workers from the Lusco-Fusco project. Focusing on education, socioeconomic status, and perceptions of pandemic consequences, the research aims to assess the inclusivity of societal responses.

Findings reveal inadequate responses during the first confinement, widening the gap between the Roma community and institutional structures, and highlight the community's vulnerability, emphasising the need for external support.

Working in a local community without community: Reinventing community work in an Alpine valley during pandemic by Paola Zonca, Federico Zamengo, Nicolò Valenzano and Marianna Peotta take us to the thirteen chapter. It outlines a participatory action-research, focusing on the training of a multidisciplinary team involved in the *Terres Monviso Incl: Invecchiare Bene* cross-border cooperation project. Funded by the European Regional Development Fund, the project aims to test an integrated social and health system in the Monviso massif region. The training, led by the University of Turin, Italy, focuses on developing individual and collective reflexivity using the Critical Incident Technique. The central thesis explores the potential of supporting practitioners in enhancing the quality of work, relationships, and skills.

In the last chapter, *Crisis in adult education of the post-pandemic period: A possible model of sustainable welfare*, Vito Balzano explores the role of adult education in shaping sustainable social policies in the post-pandemic context. Based on research conducted in the Apulia region of southern Italy, the author reflects about the intersection of learning, welfare policies, and transformations in family and labour structures. The analysis highlights the need to extend the scope of adult education beyond professional qualifications and the labour market, fostering a pedagogical model that promotes active citizenship and social sustainability. Drawing on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, the author considers how education can redefine meanings and encourage more equitable and innovative forms of social participation. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the concept of proximity welfare, emphasising the crucial role of the third sector and social cooperatives in reconstructing a more inclusive and participatory welfare system.

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Chapter 2

Laura Formenti

On systemic reflexivity, consciousness, and students' voices

Most people most of the time live in a state much closer to total unconsciousness than to any degree of consciousness even half-ways adequate to our real situation.

David Constantine, *Poetry*

I like to start

Questioning myself

To make the path, to see

Distinguishing (Clare)

I wanted

I understood

I realized that meant devoting time to myself

I needed to stop and reflect, I had to chill out (Bella)

Introduction

The capacity of (higher) education to change the world into a better place depends on consciousness and the students' capacity of naming oppression (Freire, 1972). The ones who achieve the highest levels of formal education are expected to be agents of social change and improvement by enhancing their critical capacity. Yet, unconsciousness and alienation seem to jeopardize this capacity, and to silence the need for identity and meaning. Individualism and consumerism shape both the provision of HE courses and the learning strategies of students, limiting their voices and capacity to read the context; the role of critical reflection seems to be confined at taking appropriate answers to problems, after thorough evaluation of the evidences.

Today, we live in the *reflexive* era, characterized by the massive employment of experts and tools in monitoring all kinds of processes, calculating risks, and taking informed decisions (Beck et al., 2003). The compulsory push to (self)reflexivity (Alheit, 2022) is the blessing and curse of our times; it may raise consciousness, but also nurture constant (self) surveillance that produces the 'domestication' of the best students to comply with institutional expectations. As teachers in HE, we risk reinforcing consensual and potentially oppressive beliefs and practices, instead of liberating ones (Frizelle, 2020). Then, the assumption that reflexivity would be good in itself and an antidote to the systemic forces shaping human actions and thoughts (Daniel, 2012) needs to be challenged. What do we mean by reflexivity? How do we pursue it as an aim of HE?

I teach to future social educators in different HE courses (undergraduate, graduate, master). In my teaching, I propose reflexivity as a combination of critical reflection, curiosity, creativity, and collaboration; these skills are exercised all along the courses by individual and group work, narrative and aesthetical practices, dialogic sessions, critical peer review, and the analysis of lived experience, cultural artefacts, and stories. The learning process is embodied, ecosystemic, and critical. Embodiment fosters the students' presence and responsiveness. Critical reflection signals emerging problems,

contradictions, and conflicts (Formenti et al., 2020; Harder et al., 2017), illuminating the influence of assumptions, values, cultural biases, and power. Aesthetic and narrative practices nurture creativity and imagination, hence allowing more depth, freedom of expression, and openness in connecting with others and the environment.

This narrative, aesthetic, and collaborative pedagogy, inspired by the tradition of adult education and learning, is explicitly aimed at enhancing systemic reflexivity. Distinguishing it from 'mere reflection' has become crucial in my work. At the end of each course, students must write a reflexive essay to present the outcomes of their learning path, positioning themselves from a systemic and critical perspective. In my career, I have read and assessed more than 7000 texts, but only recently I am becoming more curious—and dubious—about my framework.

In this chapter, then, I question myself, my presuppositions about reflexivity in reading and assessing these essays. In the following, I consider my learning biography as a passage that is fundamental to enable listening and recognizing that students bear different stories, relationships to knowledge, and their own ways to reflexivity. Then, I will compare two students' essays by using Gilligan's Listening Guide (Gilligan et al., 2003), a generative method of analysis that enables a deeper quality of listening and understanding. The differences between these two students' assignments illuminate—I will argue—the diversity of reflexivity.

Systemic Reflexivity: Beyond Reflection

Reflexivity is considered a key feature of qualitative interpretative inquiry, entailing the researcher's capacity for self-positioning (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Maton, 2003; Simon & Chard, 2014). As a reflexive systemic researcher, I should be aware that my action is embedded in a context (Lyle, 2019) and take responsibility for the impact of my choices and actions on the people and systems involved in my research. And yet, what is reflexivity? How is it different from reflection? Do we really need another word to talk about it?

A literature review on systemic social work and the learning needs of social educators (Formenti & Rigamonti, 2020) has shown that reflection and reflexivity are often used interchangeably. Both refer to the human capacity of creating recursive loops of the mind—thinking about our own thinking and acting—as a result of the systemic properties of the mind: circularity, interconnection, and feed-back. However, reflection is a cognitive skill by which individuals analyse their actions and thoughts in order to adapt or change the course of action. It is involved in identifying errors, making plans, and taking decisions. It can be used to revise the meaning of past action, too. Reflection is individual, adaptational, and self-orienting (Ferguson, 2018; Schön, 1983).

We use reflexivity, instead, to stress the calibration of action (Bateson, 1972) in a complex, evolving, and layered environment. It goes beyond cognitive skills since it entails interactions with changing and unpredictable situations. Reflexivity can be seen as a meta-competence entailing a range of skills beyond reflection. For authors with a psychoanalytic background (Hunt, 2013), it includes the workings of the unconscious; for post-colonial and feminist scholars (Lykes & Távora, 2020), it encompasses relationality and dialogue. In the systemic reading of social work (Krause, 2012; McNamee, 2009; Partridge et al., 2019), it considers the entanglement between the observer and the observed (Foerster, 1981). Trans-individual, entangled, and multilanguage reflexivity (Jude, 2018; Simon & Chard, 2014) embraces disorientation and uncertainty. So, while reflection relies on rationality, that is used to categorize, clarify boundaries, check outcomes, and find solutions to problems, reflexivity relies on relationality and positionality, allowing to see a larger and deeper picture, and to act coherently, recognizing the embeddedness, complexity, and mystery of human experience and the polyrhythmic quality of learning processes as a basis for emancipation (Alhadeff-Jones, 2016).

Our literature review (Formenti & Rigamonti, 2020) identified three levels of analysis of reflexivity as a systemic feature. At the microlevel, *self-reflexivity* (Bingle & Middleton, 2019) is employed by subjects to explore their own ideas

(Magnuson et al., 2012) and to question their previous judgement (Andrew, 2015; Taylor & White, 2001), combining sensorial, emotional, and experiential information (Ferguson, 2018). Students and professionals in social work and education can be empowered by this capacity (Kearns & McArdle, 2012; Papp & Rácz, 2016). At the mesolevel, shared or relational reflexivity is a quality of a group, program, or organization (Bingle & Middleton, 2019; Dugmore et al., 2018; Jude, 2018) that nurtures its capacity as a whole to respond to the evolving needs and identities of its components, partners, users, and interlocutors, and to the environment. This level of reflexivity enhances the calibration of collective action, relational awareness (Partridge et al., 2019) and shared authority (Watson, 2019). At the macrolevel, cultural reflexivity is the possibility to reveal societal structures and discourses (Monson, 2020); it becomes epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu, in Maton, 2003) when aimed at highlighting the role of (dominant) knowledge in the construction of professional practice (White, 1997). This enhances the professionals' capacity of interpretation and interrogation of the normative categories implemented in their practices and workplaces, coming from the dominant discourses in the wider society, not only a personal thing (Taylor & White, 2001).

In the world of practice, reflexivity is a key competence (Ball, 2013; D'Cruz et al., 2007) that sustains the professionals' capacity for adaptation and calibration, as well as the evolution of meaning and identity (Papp & Rácz, 2016). Ryan and Walsh (2018) connect it to critical pedagogy and social justice: 'There is no possibility of global equality without a reflexive critique of society's educational provision and of the assumptions which define knowledge. Reflexivity is essential for all educators who aspire to social justice' (p. 1). The exercise of critical subjectivity (self-reflexivity) goes together with the awareness of the circularity between subject and environment (shared/relational reflexivity), and the possibility to talk back to power. Without reflexivity, higher education would be reduced to the mere transfer of culturally embedded (dominant, hegemonic) contents, values, and practices. Reflexivity brings to interrogate any idea or action that has been normalized and naturalized.

However, in a provocative chapter, Lynch (2000) wonders about its meaning and epistemic virtue. Any paradigm seems to invoke it, like a mantra. Besides, any thoughtless device could perform a recursive process of feedback. More importantly, he states that claiming reflexivity as an unquestioned value could marginalize those who do not appropriately perform it. For instance, learners from other cultures or epistemologies, with different values and life experiences, who may not be at ease with propositional knowledge. If we consider reflexivity as a performance, it becomes normative, and this creates a strange, paradoxical loop. As a researcher and a teacher, I feel compelled to revise this concept and my practice of it, and to question its outcomes. What do I consider as an 'appropriate performance' of reflexivity? Am I contributing to raising consciousness, or marginalizing those students who do not perform appropriate skills?

My Experience: An Auto-ethnographic Exercise

In teaching, I follow the principles of complexity and co-operative transformation (Formenti, 2018), based on von Foerster's aesthetical imperative 'if you desire to see, learn how to act' and the ethical imperative: 'act always so as to increase the number of choices' (1973, pp. 60–61), on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (Mezirow et al., 2000), and Heron's practice of co-operative inquiry (1996). My syllabus is based on 'learning by doing'; reflexivity starts from reconsidering experience and read it with a plurality of lenses. Taking inspiration from Frizelle (2020), I use autoethnography to highlight the political in my experience of teaching. I wonder if my action reproduces or reveals oppression in my students' academic experience. Most academic teaching, in fact, is normative and normalizing; teaching practices are very seldom questioned. The disconnection of the professional from the personal brings to disembodiment; emotions, bodies, and biographic experiences are expunged. When teaching is presented as neutral and objective (Hooks, 2003; Shor & Freire, 1987; Sternberg, 2002), it reinforces the *statu quo* and hinders the emergence of new thoughts and

actions. While Frizelle's work (2020) is focused on personal knowledge about LGBTQ issues, my aim is to interrogate my learning experience and compare it with my students'. Is it possible that I unintentionally enact oppression by forcing students towards performing reflexivity? Does my pedagogy foster empowerment and voice?

My autoethnographic journey started by a biographical reconstruction of my relationship to knowing (Munari, 1993), and its evolution:

I have always been a good learner. My odds were unfavourable for gender, social class, and family background. No graduated persons among my relatives. But learning came very easy for me, and a hidden hierarchy of privilege ensures that excellent students benefit positive attention, recognition, and access to more education and resources. 'Poor learners' were disenfranchised and oppressed at school. Maybe I cannot fully understand the learning experience of those who feel unfit to the system. Only after my PhD I realized my position as a non-traditional student, a working-class woman in HE, with problems with the university habitus, and I opened up to vulnerability, starting to challenge previous thoughts and practices. I was able, in time, to name my own hyper adaptation to the academic profile, and to question my assumptions.

From 1999 to 2010 (Formenti, 2009, 2014), I taught teachers and invited them to write autobiographically on *how did I learn about learning?* I wanted to offer them the opportunity to build awareness and understanding of their personal relationship to knowing. Their narratives about their learning journey illuminated individual singular experiences; occasionally, they mentioned specific positive or negative relationships; only very rarely they became critical of the context—at the meso and macrolevels. In that period, I collected more than one thousand self-reflexive essays that confirmed—as I see it now—an implicit assumption about individual and cognitive reflection (not reflexivity) as a pillar in the building of a teacher's identity, while social engagement, power awareness, and collective learning remained in the shadows. I was not asking explicitly enough to explore the social and institutional dimensions of their learning.

In 2005 I started using a compositional approach inspired by Heron's work (1996), where autobiographical awareness mingled with presentational languages, collaborative sense-making, and social commitment. The collaboration with younger researchers brought me to explore the interplay of material and symbolic objects (Formenti et al., 2017), the construction of collective minds (Del Negro & Formenti, 2019), and the multiplication of voices and stories in the classroom (Formenti & Jorio, 2019; Formenti & Rigamonti, 2020). Using autoethnography to booster the reflexive impact of autobiography, I formalized a pedagogical model based on systemic reflexivity (Formenti, 2017, 2018; Heron, 1996).

Now, I question myself: What kind of learners are my students? Do I design, run, and assess my courses coherently with their life experiences, or am I enforcing my own agenda, reinforcing mystification and power? This dilemma is also fuelled by critiques: some students complain about being challenged and not supported enough; some struggle when I ask them to take a position towards learning and towards oneself as a learner. My assignments risk to add on structural constraints, power issues, and misrecognition. Power is unbalanced in my favour: they have no choice but comply. The university sends a message that knowledge is one and everyone learns in the same way; somehow, my message is no different. Yes, I propose a personalized curriculum to sustain each student's uniqueness, interests, and way of knowing and learning, but this very proposal might paradoxically marginalize those who perform in a way that appears to me inappropriate. That is, 'not enough reflexive'. This is why I tried to read the reflexive essays written by my students with a fresher look, paying specific attention to their voices.

Listening To Voices (and Voicing) in the Reflexive Essay

Speaking of students' voices, and their relationship to academic success, it is crucial to recognize that 'voice' may be a problematic construct, and narrowed down to domesticated voices, as argued by many studies in critical

interpretative inquiry (see for example Young & Jerome, 2020). For space reasons, I cannot develop this argument here, but I want to stress that *voice* is an emergent quality of a relationship and a context: in oppressive relationships, the individual does not have a voice, and sometimes the journey to 'voicing' oneself is very long. Besides, voice is multiple and changeable: we express different needs, desires, identities in different situations and moments of our lives. So, for me learning is not about 'discovering my true voice' (an ontological, static, individual construct), but 'voicing the multiple voices' and consider their relational and social effects. It is also about taking responsibility for the process.

In the reflexive essay, I ask each student to (re)interpret their learning path by writing in a narrative yet academic way (i.e. bringing arguments, using quotes, referring to theories and concepts, etc.), using the first person, and bridging their experience in the course (and beyond) with aesthetical imagination, theory, and practice. It is a challenging task, but a good way to start self-assessment and to build some awareness of one's own learning. I take this essay as a starting point for a process of evaluation that ends with the oral exam. Many students seem to learn while writing, rereading and rewriting their text, then when they receive my written feedback (some of them talk about an epiphany), and in the dialogic conversation that we have during the exam, bringing to a final mark. The first evaluation of the essays is challenging for me. I read them looking for clues of systemic reflexivity and the 'four Cs': criticality, creativity, curiosity, and collaboration. Usually, a few of the essays lack both reflection and reflexivity; these students 'cut-and-paste' concepts from the readings. Most students perform some kind of reflection, for example in comments about something that happened during the course, or ideas found in the readings, or some experience interpreted in the light of the course contents. Reflexivity—as defined above—is more elusive and rarer; since the reflexive process is invisible, I can only infer it. What are my clues? In the past few years, I have used creativity, curiosity, collaboration, and criticality as guidelines for the assessment, but I am searching for a more rigorous and respectful method.

Last year, I analysed more thoroughly a corpus of 18 reflexive essays written by master students. I wondered: are these students empowered by writing a reflexive essay, as I would like to think? During the course (15 months long), they have been invited on many occasions to question themselves, to enact emotional and relational awareness individually and collectively, to write stories and use active listening, to discuss with each other about their traineeship and work experience: did this reflexive pedagogy build reflexivity and self-reflexivity? How is this witnessed in the writings?

I took inspiration from the Listening Guide, an interpretative method for analysis developed by Gilligan and coll. (2003), based on four steps:

- A. Listening to the plot: what is the landscape, what is happening here? This thematic analysis, based on relationships and process, recognizes the author's position, as well as the researcher's.
- B. Listening to the subject's multiple voices by creating an I-poem made by extrapolating all the phrases starting with 'I' in the original order; the researcher chooses the length of each phrase and uses punctuation and cuts to enhance the poetic quality and rhythm of the resulting text.
- C. Listening to counterpoints: different voices are marked to signal a change in attitude, style, or a recurrent content etc. These voices can work in unison, in opposition, or complementarily.
- D. The researcher composes the final text using the different readings and reflexive notes.

In all phases, the researcher is engaged with their own values and expectations. Since this method celebrates interpretation, it requires self-reflexivity and a willingness to question each step of the analysis. In building the I poem, since the subject is often implicit in the Italian language, and the construction of the phrase is not linear as in English, I had to interpret and make choices about cuts, already at the level of the text. Then, I realized that each word or phrase in these texts can be read as a tentative of 'voicing

oneself' (more selves, indeed), but the outcome will depend on the quality of my listening. I tried to be faithful to words, and aware of my frameworks of meaning.

I divided the I poems in stanzas following my inspiration, to enhance the emerging different voices and their counterpoints. This obliged me to recognize my interpretative contribution at each step in the process.

Here, I present the results of my analysis of two students' work, Clare and Bella. I have chosen them because of the differences in how they enact their reflexivity. While Clare is the 'typical' academically performing student, connecting field experience with theory, using a research methodology and justifying her choices at every step, Bella can appear, at a first glance, as a narrator, very sensitive but 'not reflexive enough'. The juxtaposition of their poems illuminated my prejudice about what is/is not reflexive.

Students' Voices in the Text: Clare and Bella

Clare: A key to open every door?

In her project for the master course, Clare decided to compare two programs: her workplace—a day unit for vulnerable children—and a group home for adolescents; this comparison of 'two contexts, apparently so similar, then distinguishing them in every single facet', brought her to refine her gaze: 'my eyes, used to see the way of doing in my workplace, revealed my own lenses, and brought to my attention the differences of thought, manners, cultures'.

An epiphany inspired her title—*A key to open every door?* In front of a locked office in the group home, searching in a bulky keyring, the hosting colleague said this is a big waste of time in shifts. Clare was struck:

'I thought it would be more practical to avoid that burden, that cumulates on many others. In my workplace, I have a master key for all the locked rooms. [Then] I wondered on the metaphor: would it be more meaningful and helpful to have one and the same solution for every situation, as a master key [...] or a thought for every choice, a solution that would not forcibly fit with every problem?'

She started to look for more details and differences within the units. Both places looked similar, 'homelike':

'[...] a dining room, a kitchen and a large salon with sofas that represent to me [...] a symbol of sharing. When a boy comes through the door, kicking off his shoes and diving to the couch, to me that's the moment when the place has become his.'

In both places, relationships are the core of intervention: not only with the children, but with parents, teachers, sport coaches, friends, church, and local community. Weaving a network of relationships 'is helpful to make the child feel a protagonist' and to map 'who are the subjects involved in his care'. Little by little, Clare comes to question the way of doing at her workplace: 'Why are our actions done in such a way and not another one?'. Since actions come 'from the ideas we hold about the children and their families', she decides to investigate the representations in the two teams by asking open questions (a questionnaire compiled by each professional) and surprisingly she receives similar answers about ideas, but different ones about actions. This difference can be tackled using theory; Clare is very fond of *Clinica della formazione* (Ferrante & Palmieri, 2019) a Foucauldian approach that combines the material, structural and relational dimensions of the pedagogical apparatus that could be used—she argues—to reveal structural aspects 'enacted by the professionals but never exposed, understood or analysed'.

In the day unit, the child is represented as 'deprived, lacking routine, disoriented, resourceful but unknowingly so, hurt but competent'. Also, the

group home professionals speak of 'disorientation, lack of routine, resources', but they stress more the desire for new experiences, the search for beauty, a sort of energy, strength, and resilience that is manifested by the adolescents. The good and the bad seem more balanced in this case. Clare wonders about the educators' biographies and values; she thinks they should be challenged: 'What makes you think that this dad doesn't want to stay with his son? What is your idea of a functional father?'

Clare identifies contradictions between ideas and actions in observing everyday life in the unit. For example, the idea of a competent child against the constant control by educators. Or: the representation of disoriented children against the implementation of an unstructured setting. She wonders: 'What is behind an educational choice? Why are these units so different? What is the hidden idea under, or inside, the two systems?'

She starts to develop her 'clinic and critical' reflexivity (using the language of *Clinica della formazione*) naming all the structural and contextual constraints impinging on professionals: the unit's routine and habitus, the organization, the funding process from the welfare system, the needs and behaviours of the children themselves and their families. In the closing of the text, she expresses satisfaction for her achievements, and a desire for 'a change in perspective' as a leverage for change in action. She has realized that children at her workplace are framed as lacking and fragile due to their past. On the contrary, the group home is more focused on the present, and this seems to open more possibilities for action.

'I am aware that working for years in a context may bring to stagnating thoughts; I wish I will always have diverse lenses in my pocket, to be used in new, complex and "uncombed" situations, which are common in educational work.'

Clare's I-poem (due to space limitations, this is a short version).

I like to start
Questioning myself
To make the path, to see
Distinguishing
I wanted to find

I work

I have chosen to write
I was asking
I explain

I work

Joking with the colleague
I have thought
I wondered

I work

As I said, I made choices in writing the I poem. In it, I hear two alternating voices. As two birds: one on the ground picking seeds (*I work*), the other on a tree branch looking at it, questioning, making distinctions and choices. The reflexive Clare observes, thinks and problematizes, comparing and wrapping up her data. The working Clare is less audible but strong: *I work* is iterated in the text, creating a rhythm. She can joke with a colleague and ask questions too, playing different positions in the system. It seems to me that she celebrates both reflection and reflexivity, using verbs that refer to actions and thoughts. The way she uses structural theory and pedagogy to answer a dilemma is very personal and engaged.

Bella: The Vegetable Garden as a Time-free Space

Bella has just started a new job as a social educator in a group home for adolescent males. In her reflexive essay, she starts by a long autobiographic narrative connecting her learning path to her father and to the vegetable garden as a transforming place, where physical action, emotions, identity, and self-recognition can happen.

'Since a child I was playing with neighbours selling plants and flowers [...] I remember my father, during the summer he devoted himself to the vegetable garden [...] hardly left me try by myself, he was afraid that I could break the plants' roots [...] He put in this so much love and passion that I just stood there and look at him [...]

Entering adolescence, I less and less went out to the garden with my father [...] until third year of high school [...] I started to notice that I was accompanied by rage, sadness, tiredness, joy, bitterness, frustration, light-heartedness. Working the vegetable garden allowed me to fully live the emotions I was feeling [...] I could let off steam [...] inflicting the spade as a blade.

I could cut the buds of tomatoes with a surgeon's precision [...] I could stay hours contemplating its beauty [...] nobody but the darkness of the night could tell me it was time to go home. I have learnt there to better know myself; I have learnt to recognize my emotions; I have learnt to live them.'

She tells how she has learned to trust herself, 'going to the garden meant dedicate time to me'. This story offers a landscape for the following part of the essay, describing her project for the master course at her workplace. The garden activity is not scheduled in the weekly program of the unit: she wants it to be free and atemporal: 'children are drowned by detailed programs, organized to the minute to accommodate school, homework, sport, support family, origin family', so she wonders: what is left for improvisation or simply doing nothing?

Bella intends to 'follow the flux of what the boys bring in'. But her colleagues are puzzled: Who is running the garden? What are we planning to grow? Let's abound with tomatoes, so we will not need to buy them, right? But Bella wants to 'experiment together, exchange knowledge' and foster self-discovery. She knows that doing brings memories. Every child has a right to live with nature, nurturing imagination, collaboration, problem solving, and self-esteem.

Four boys decide to volunteer and prepare the ground with her. Then, a forced pause to allow the terrain to rest and absorb nutrients. 'The boys were impatient to sow [...] but we had to slow down [...] As for the ground, neither the mind can be arranged once and for all, you have to go back to it every day, doing what is needed to keep it well nurtured and fertile'. Then, time to sow. An older boy joins the group, re-enacting previous learning at a foster home. 'Waiting day by day the tiny creatures' sprouting. Not easy, the waiting seemed never ending, but the joy of seeing a little green new-born leave is priceless.'

Bella starts to notice that boys often go to the garden to check but also to vent, after a quarrel, in search for a connection with the sky's beauty, the changing weather, birds, insects, touching the wholeness of life. Or learning that a pumpkin flower will become a pumpkin only if pollinated. 'So, everything depends on the context and diverse environmental factors, no matter how much care we put in it, it is not said that we will get the outcome we hope for.'

Bella's focus is the experiment, not its outcomes. She is happy when the boys try to involve other educators; these seemed puzzled by the apparent chaos. 'I tried to explain that we were attending the garden, but not interested in harvesting, rather in experimenting and studying nature'. They stopped asking. During a meeting she tried again to make her point on

'the relevance of atemporal activities in our daily life, which is packed with organized things. I was surprised that only one colleague endorsed me, while the others remained silent. Maybe it was not the best moment or maybe we are not ready as a team to let go our weekly planning.'

When I composed Bella's I-poem, I realized that her text is divided in three parts: an autobiographic part where almost all the phrases have 'I' as a subject, a middle part about the garden project, with very few 'I-phrases', and a final part with a mix of subjects. This triggered a question: how can we detect self-reflexivity without an 'I'?

Bella's I-poem (due to space limitations, this is a short version).

I played
I remember, I remember
I liked going out, lend a hand
I went, I joined
I remember
I watched, I stayed looking at him

I penetrated
I went out
I did not want to listen
I felt free to experiment

I felt I could live
I could vent digging, inflicting
I could cut, choose
I could stay, admire, contemplate

I learnt to know myself
I learnt to recognize
I learnt to live them

I don't remember

I had nobody
I was open to listen
I jumped in
I tried to put into practice
I trimmed
I felt bad, I had not obtained, I lost courage

I decided—I would never have to deal with this again
I was satisfied in seeing, I could see
I had to do it, I was ready to, I could experiment and prove myself
I started devoting myself

I wanted
I understood
I realized that meant devoting time to myself
I needed to stop and reflect, I had to chill out

[here, a long silence of the I when the project starts—the subject is mostly 'them', the boys, or the colleagues]

I made [them] notice
I did not insist, I expected
I will need to tackle
I had not explained
I was doing
I told we are arranging, I tried to explain, I managed to talk
I tried.

Bella has a way to express her reflexivity that is not mental, but more related to emotions, actions, and the environment. I used stanzas to represent my grasp of this journey, hearing a different voice at each step: the remembering young woman, the explorer, the empowered adult, the learning,

the resilient, the self-aware. She uses images and metaphors, she shows systemic sensitivity—for the garden, the sprouts, the boys, the clouds, her team, herself—she can refer to theory to sustain her choices and illustrate her motivations, but this is not central to her text. I am able, now, thanks to this exercise, to appreciate more this kind of text, that may appear 'less academically appropriate' just because the author's subjectivity prevails on critical arguments: but what is more critical, nowadays, than creating a chaotic time-free garden, or celebrating the need for slowing down, and respect the rhythms of nature?

Conclusions

With this first endeavour, I tried to explore my theory and practice of reflexivity as a teacher in HE, a critical systemic researcher in adult education, and a learner myself. I have argued that the distinction between reflection and reflexivity is helpful in separating a cognitive skill—useful for adaptation and decision making—from a meta-competence that allows more complex processes, beyond the rational and conscious domain, beyond the individual, and a narrow, ontological, monological view of identity and voice. Using the Listening Guide on Bella's and Clare's essays has been illuminating, and the source of my prejudice became evident: while Bella does not intellectualize, Clare uses a mental vocabulary (compare the verbs in their 'I Poems'). Besides, Clare devotes a large part of her essay to theory. She performs better, academically speaking. However, Bella's voices appear richer, more embodied, her biography is explored in a very significant way as a determinant of her professional identity. They are different, and their difference needs to be considered when they receive assessment.

This exercise allowed me to become more attentive to the strategies of voicing that students use in their assignments, and to discuss with them about it. A further step in shared reflexivity.

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Ana C. D. Lopes, PhD, is a Tutor in Universidade Aberta, Lisboa, Portugal and a researcher at CEMRI/UAb. PhD in Intercultural Relations at Universidade Aberta. Master in Statistics and Information Management at Nova IMS. Graduated in Management at Universidade Aberta, Lisbon & in Mathematics applied to Operational Research at NOVA School of Science and Technology. In terms of research, the areas of interest cover a reflection on the opportunities and challenges of the contemporary world, with a focus on education and interculturality.

Anne-Gaëlle, PhD, is a Professional counsellor and coordinator of a master's program in adult vocational training. She supports learners in their personal and professional development using practice analysis approaches. She is also involved in adult education research at the University of Rennes 2 in France, focusing on the links between on the potentially transformative links between research, training, and professional activities.

Aurora Coelho is a social educator currently working in the Legos Project in Faro, Portugal, involved in intervention work with its homeless population. She worked as a social educator in neighbourhoods of subsidized housing in Faro and Olhão (2013–2023). She holds a bachelor's and a master's degree in Social Education from the University of Algarve (UALg), where she worked as an invited assistant professor. The focus of her intervention outreach is mostly on roma communities. Previously, Aurora Coelho served as co-chair promoting the association Núcleo

do Algarve do Instituto Paulo Freire de Portugal (2009–2013) and participated in the international project Older Men as Active Learners in the Community (OMAL, 2014). She is the founder of the Na Mira Jogos board game project (2006–today), engaging with a diverse population.

Carol Thompson, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer and Researcher at the University of Bedfordshire. She has over 30 years' teaching experience and more than 20 years working with trainee teachers and mentors. Passionate about sharing her experience, Carol is the author of several books aimed at supporting teacher education, including *The Trainee Teacher's Handbook*, *Learning Theories for Everyday Teaching*, *Being a Teacher*, *Reflective Practice for Professional Development* and *The Magic of Mentoring*.

Cláudio Garcia graduated in Computer Engineering, and began working at the MOJU Association with children, young people and their families in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods of Olhão from 2012 onwards. Between 2019 and 2022, worked with roma communities in Faro, carrying out activities in the area of school and digital inclusion. Also in 2022, he completed his master's degree in Social Education, with the dissertation theme *(ROMA)ria para a Escola: Contributos para a inclusão escolar nas comunidades ciganas*. In 2021, he became a trainer for the High Commission for Migration, in the area of roma communities. Since 2022, he has embraced the challenge of teaching IT at Bernardette Romeira private school in Olhão.

Elaine Battams, PhD. After a career in Early Years, Elaine moved into Teacher Education and is now based at Barnfield College in Luton. She is an advanced practitioner supporting others in all things teaching, learning and assessment. A firm believer in reflective practice and self-development, Elaine was one of the first cohort in the country to achieve Advanced Teacher Status (ATS) and CTeach with the Education and Training Foundation.

Eric Bertrand, PhD, is a teacher and researcher in adult education at Rennes 2 University in France. His research focuses on the transformative learning of adults at work, and on the heuristic links between research,

work, and training activities. He is co-director of a master's degree program in training. He is involved in a number of professional networks concerned with the professionalization of professions, professionals and organizations, such as the Centre des Jeunes Dirigeants.

Federico Zamengo, PhD, is Associate Professor of General and Social Education at University of Turin, where he teaches Theory of Education. He is interested on community development themes, with a focus on the education informal and non-formal context and with reference to young people and adults.

Henrique M. A. C. Fonseca, PhD. Degree in Biology from the University of Porto and PhD in Biology from the University of Dundee, (Scotland). He is currently Assistant Professor at the Department of Biology & GeoBioTec at the University of Aveiro and his main areas of research are Education, specifically lifelong learning for adult and senior students, and Biology, in the fields of Botany, Microbiology and Phytopathology. In the area in question, he has focused his interest on the characterization of non-traditional higher education audiences and/or those with unique characteristics. In particular, students entering higher education via those over 23 years of age and CET/CTeSP, students from the PALOP, and those who have special educational needs; with the ultimate objective of finding answers that enhance socialization processes, learning and academic success.

Jérôme Eneau, PhD, is a full professor of adult education at Rennes 2 University, France. His research themes focus on adult autonomy, emancipation, and self-directed learning. He is particularly interested in the social dimensions of self-directed learning and accompanies master's and doctoral students on various issues related to these problems. His interests include both lifelong learning and more specific issues related to learning contexts (vocational education and training, learning in the workplace, trainers and their professionalisation, learning technologies, etc.).

Joanna Stankowska, PhD, is sociologist, a key expert in the Educational Research Institute (IBE) in Warsaw and a doctoral student at the

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Julita Pieńkosz, PhD, is sociologist, a senior expert in the Educational Research Institute (IBE) in Warsaw, Poland. She is the author of scientific publications on the development of national sociology and the methodological foundations of practicing the history of sociology. Currently, her research interests focus on the broadly understood issues of education, particularly the structural determinants of adult learning. In her professional work, she uses both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection.

Laura Formenti, PhD, is a full professor in General and Social Pedagogy at Milano-Bicocca University, Italy. She does research in the education, training and guidance of adults and older adults, vocational training for educators, family pedagogy, social work and health. Her approach is systemic, participatory and transformative. She uses ethnographic, narrative-aesthetic and cooperative research methods in a critical interpretative framework, often entailing action-research and intervention. She has explored original and new methodologies to study as well as transform knowledge and the perspectives of meaning with individuals, groups, organizations and complex systems, acting at a micro, meso and macro-level. Among her publications, the book *Transforming Perspectives in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education. A Dialogue*, written with Linden West, received the 2019 Cyril O. Houle Award for Outstanding Literature in Adult Education.

Lucília Santos, PhD in Condensed Matter Physics, Associate Professor at the University of Aveiro (UA), Department of Physics. Member of RCDTET. Teaching and supervision activities include Sciences, Engineering, Health, and Teacher Training (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees) and Supervision of Integrated Internships/PPS. She developed research

in Physics and Physics Teaching and Learning, and the focus is Lifelong Learning. She represented UA at EUCEN and coordinated CIFOP, UINFOC and, finally, continUA, where the One-Stop Shop for M23 students is based. The main interest is the characterization and monitoring of the academic path of non-traditional students (M23, CET/CTeSP, PALOP, SEN, International) in higher education and the development and implementation of immersion courses for these audiences at UA, aiming at their academic success and social integration.

Maria Natália P. Ramos, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Universidade Aberta, Lisboa, Portugal. Scientific Coordinator of the Centre for The Study of Migration and Intercultural Relations/CEMRI/UAb. Responsible Researcher of the Group Health, Culture and Development Research, UAb. PHD in Psychology by the University of Paris V, Sorbonne, France. Psychology. Author and director of numerous scientific works both written and filmic, in particular on intercultural, migratory, gender, educational, psychosocial, clinical and health, communicational, intergenerational, family and developmental issues.

Marianna Peotta is a professional educator. She graduated in Pedagogy at the University of Turin. She got a Master's degree in Pedagogical Consultancy in legal, family and school issues and one in Social Work in the field of protection of minors, promoted by the Erickson Study Centre in collaboration with the Relational Social Work Centre of the Catholic University of Milan. She works in Turin as an educator at the local health board, where she deals with the treatment and rehabilitation of individuals with substance use disorder. Previously, she worked for some social cooperatives, mainly dealing with community development, youth housing projects and social innovation. Main research topics are the promotion of well-being and the methodology of community development, social innovation, urban regeneration, and the valorisation of marginal territories.

Marta Petelewicz, PhD, is sociologist, an expert in the Educational Research Institute (IBE) in Warsaw, Poland. Her main scientific interest is social

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Micaela Castiglioni, PhD, is professor of adult and elderly education at the University of Milan-Bicocca; Department of Human Sciences for Education "R. Massa". For years she has been involved in the training of healthcare professionals with narrative and self-reflective methodologies. She designed, in Italy, the first Interdepartmental Master in Medical Humanities and Narrative in Medicine of which she is the Director and Scientific Responsible - University of Milan-Bicocca. She has written numerous texts and articles in A-level magazines on the themes of fragility and transitions in adulthood, on care and on the solitudes of our contemporary world.

Natália Rego, PhD, is an Associate Professor (Tenured) with Habilitation at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (Portugal). She has a degree in Biological Engineering by the University of Minho (Portugal), a Master degree in Environmental Engineering from the Faculty of Engineering of Porto University (Portugal), and a Ph.D in Advanced Mathematical Techniques and their Applications from the University of Vigo (Spain). Her research interest is to study in depth the Hom/Lie and Hom/Leibniz algebras and their generalizations, namely, endowed with n -ary operations. She is Member Associated of the research center Mathematics Center of the University of Porto – CMUP and, actually is the Academic Coordinator of the School of Technology.

Neil Hopkins, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer and Advanced Researcher at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. He has published two books: *Democracy and Citizenship in Adult and Further Education* (Springer 2013) and *Democratic Socialism and Education: New Perspectives on Policy and Practice* (Springer 2019). He was awarded the British Educational Research Journal's 'Editors' Choice Award' in 2020. He has recently co-edited the volume, *Reflections on Identity: Narratives from Educators* (Springer 2023). He has recently had an article published on teacher identity in 'Modern Psychoanalysis'.

Nicolò Valenzano, PhD, is a high school teacher of philosophy and human sciences. He is currently a Post–Doc Fellow in Theory of Education at the Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences at the University of Turin in Italy. In the past, he has focused on topics such as death education and the teaching of philosophy. Currently, his interests lie in Philosophy for Community as a proposal for adult education in informal and non-formal settings, community educational practices in marginalized areas, informal teacher training, and Paulo Freire's pedagogical anthropology.

Paola Zonca, PhD, is a confirmed researcher of General and Social Pedagogy at the Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences of University of Turin (Italy). She teaches Childhood Pedagogy and her research interests and expertise deal with early childhood education and care, adult–child relationships, child and family policies, home–school relationships, professional development in ECEC's settings with particular regard to the perspective of continuing education.

Ricardo Simões, PhD, is an Associate Professor (Tenured) with Habilitation at the Polytechnic Institute of Cavado and Ave (Portugal). He has a Ph.D. in Materials Science and Engineering from the University of North Texas (USA). His areas of research include Engineering Design, Sustainability, and Complex Engineering Systems, having supervised 11 PhD and 30 MS theses, and coordinated a total of 20 National and International research projects funded by competitive programs. He has 95 Publications in Refereed Scientific Journals, 17 Book Chapters, 100 Publications in International Conference Proceedings, 2 Edited Books, and 70 oral presentations in International Conferences.

Samantha Broadhead, PhD, is Head of Research at Leeds Arts University, UK. Her research interests include access and widening participation in art and design education and the educational sociology of Basil Bernstein (1924–2000). She serves on the Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning's editorial board. Broadhead has co-authored with Professor Maggie Gregson (2018) *Practical Wisdom and Democratic Education – Phronesis, Art and Non-traditional Students*, Palgrave

Macmillan. She also has co-authored with Rosemarie Davies and Anthony Hudson (2019) *Perspectives on Access: Practice and Research*, Emerald Publishing. She has produced an edited book, *Access and Widening Participation in Arts Higher Education*, Palgrave Macmillan (2022). Broadhead is working on *Learning Returns*, a practice-based project that aims to capture the experiences of mature students studying art and design through film-making.

Sharon Hooper, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer and a filmmaker. Having had previous experience in television as well as community filmmaking, I now mainly make academic films and work with third sector organisations. I am also undertaking a PhD which focuses on the archives and work of Leeds Animation Workshop, a feminist film group making animated documentaries since the Seventies. Within my broader interest in feminist filmmaking, my research explores participatory and collaborative practice. I am interested in skills sharing and the sharing of experiences through film and filmmaking.

Ted Fleming, PhD, is emeritus professor at Maynooth University, Ireland and adjunct professor at Teachers College Columbia University, New York. At Maynooth, he was head of the Department of Adult Education and associate dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences. He was a senator on the Senate of the National University of Ireland. Graduate studies included an MA and EdD (Columbia University) with Jack Mezirow as supervisor. A summer school with Paulo Freire in Boston followed. He is currently external academic advisor to the Citizens' University and to the UNESCO funded Learning City Project in Larissa, Greece. In Ireland, he is a contributor to the International Expert Group, advising AONTAS (Ireland's Association of Adult Learners) on formally recognizing student voice in Ireland's Further Education programmes. His publications include *European Perspectives on Transformation Theory*, co-edited with Alexis Kokkos, and Fergal Finnegan.

Vito Balzano, PhD, is a senior researcher (RtdB) in General and Social Pedagogy at the Department of Education Sciences, Psychology,

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Emerging from a conference by the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) in Portugal, this book offers an insightful reflection of adult education's evolution in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring themes of access, learning approaches, identity, and digital pedagogy. It critically addresses the shift towards digital learning and its implications on social interaction, pedagogical practices, and the educator–learner dynamic. The narrative spans across diverse contexts, including higher education, community education, vocational learning, and informal learning environments, highlighting the pandemic's exacerbation of social inequalities and the nuanced effects on gender, ethnicity, and age. Through empirical research and reflective analysis, the book interrogates the potential of digital technologies in fostering inclusive and accessible learning experiences, while also considering the challenges of maintaining a sense of community and identity in virtual spaces. It not only assesses the immediate responses to the pandemic but also projects future implications and possibilities for adult education, aiming to inform practice, policy, and research. The book stands as a testament to the enduring significance of adult education in navigating times of crisis and change, advocating for a more equitable and responsive educational landscape.