1. INTRODUCTION

Doing Critical and Creative Research in Adult Education

Academic scholarship on adult education and learning has developed a great deal over the past thirty years. Within adult education there has been a great deal of methodological creativity and innovation linked to the commitment to doing research in a critical and participatory manner. While there is a significant body of work which explores how to do research in a creative and critical way using a specific methodological approach and/or from a particular theoretical perspective in adult education [for example biographical methods e.g. Merrill and West (2009), feminist research Chilisa and Preece (2005) or visual participatory methods Butterwick & Roy (2016) etc.], there are relatively few publications on methodologies and methods that explore diverse ways of doing critical research on adult education and learning in a single volume. Typically, researchers, students and lecturers on adult education courses find themselves relying on handbooks and guides to research from cognate disciplines in the social sciences. Although, interdisciplinary ‘borrowing’ is inevitable and valuable, we think in a mature and established discipline there is a clear need for a book which explores a range of research methodologies which are directly orientated to the contexts, themes, values and problematics of the field. As such this collection seeks to address this gap and offer readers insight into the exciting and diverse range of critical research methodologies being used in contemporary adult education.

The book does not approach research methods in an abstract or schematic way. The emphasis is on the craft of research as a practical, ethical and theoretical endeavor that happens in specific contexts. In selecting the contributors, we have sought to include a wide range of case studies using diverse methodologies in order to capture the vitality and complexity of contemporary adult education research. This includes contributions on biographical, narrative, embodied, arts and media-based and ethnographic methods alongside the critical use of quantitative and mixed methods. Each of the chapters take up the themes of criticality and creativity, whilst also reflecting on the purpose of these research methodologies as they are applied in a variety of settings and contexts.

Using case studies the contributors explore the links between research, pedagogy and creative forms of transformative social, cultural and political agency and address how creative research can support meaningful learning in education institutions as well as non-formal settings. In doing so the contributors illuminate a range of
approaches that combine the critical and the creative, and challenge epistemologies that erase the complexity of social phenomena. The book also considers how we can co-create and disseminate research in meaningful collaboration with a variety of learning communities and publics. Several chapters explore the histories and intellectual legacies that can be drawn upon to feed a sense of creativity in critical research as we think this will be of use to both experienced and novice researchers in adult education and in other social sciences.

CRITICALITY AND CREATIVITY IN ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH

A good deal of the development and diversification of critical adult education research follows patterns which are evident across the arts, humanities and social sciences (Merriam & Cunningham, 1989; Leavy, 2009, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It would also be a mistake to exaggerate the homogeneity of adult education: it is an international and highly diverse field of practice and research. Nevertheless, adult education has certain well-established areas of interest as well as methodological tendencies and orientations linked to the historical formation and development of the field (Duke, 1999; Rubenson & Elfert, 2015). These characteristics and trends have been noted in recent research on its journals and research networks (Fejes & Nylander, 2014; Käpplinger, 2015).

Some of specificities of adult education research can be linked to the processes, relationships, beliefs, and epistemologies valued by adult education practitioners more widely. There is, we believe, a type of what Gramsci (1971) called ‘good sense’ – a type of critical and ethical orientation – generated by the field as a whole which also informs the assumptions of many academic researchers. To be precise, this is a democratic and collaborative ethic which seeks to identify and foster progressive transformative possibilities for individuals, communities and society through research, teaching and learning. Of course not all adult education researchers share these values and orientations but they are very widespread. This has fostered a type of criticality that can be discerned across the collection and is marked by a sensitivity to questions of power in learning and research.

How this ‘good sense’, this criticality, is articulated and instantiated varies a great deal, yet one can point to other shared coordinates beyond a broad commitment to democracy and transformative education such as; a strong critique of the positivist assumptions which dominated research and knowledge in the social sciences, an abiding interest in questions of social justice and power; a holistic approach to learning and education which is not, nor can be, sectorally or institutionally defined; and an emphasis on the importance of non-formal and everyday knowledge. In concrete research terms this has manifested itself in recent decades in terms of a preference for intensive, qualitative methods alongside the widespread use of ‘horizontal’ collaborative research processes which aim to be participatory and engaging.

The desire to do research differently and conduct critical research with rather than about people demands theoretical and methodological creativity. It calls for
a willingness to rupture hierarchical relations in order to create new collaborative spaces of learning and research (and significantly many of the contributors to the collection treat collaborative pedagogies and research as intertwined activities). It positions participants as active co-creators of knowledge (Freire, 1972; Dominíček, 2000) emphasizing openness and responsiveness rather than prescribing meanings (Yang & Lawrence, 2017). It is worth recalling that the origins of Participatory Action Research are in adult education (Hall, 1992) and the creative ferment of emancipatory movements in the global south. This approach means research in adult education is often viewed by researchers as a collective learning process which has the potential to lead to significant transformation, empowerment and even for some emancipation (Duckworth & Smith, 2018). The focus cannot therefore be on ‘data gathering’, but sparking and encouraging collective and critical knowledge production with people. Being critical in this sense is not only being aware of one’s concepts, goals and methods but of constantly exploring how the means and ends of research are connected and enmeshed in specific contexts and power dynamics.

Working collaboratively with people requires different modalities of research; with criteria of validity, reliability, ethics and quality based on the capacity of researchers to be truly responsive to what they learn through dialogue. This orientation in critical adult education research has required developing research methods which allow for the exploration of the nuances and textures of social and educational experience (Lucio-Villegas, 2015). Researchers seek to elaborate methodological approaches which are cognizant and reflexive of people’s experiences; drawing on the diversity of people’s interests (hooks, 1995, Dutton & Knightley, 2007, Leavy, 2014). We would argue, the source of a great deal of creativity is an ethical and political desire to find new terms for the production of knowledge.

Once we think collaboration between what the researcher wants to know, and what the participant wants to be known is important, research methodologies which respect and celebrate a variety of ways of being and ways of knowing becomes crucial. As a result, there is a very strong interest in research methods, such as arts-based approaches which offer multimodal ways of revealing, analyzing and expressing this. As Richardson (2000) identifies, creative methodologies should open up interpretive responses and should be artistically shaped, satisfying, and complex. This requires developing a wide array of arts, multi-media, narrative and embodied methods that reflect the diversity evident in people’s ways of being and knowing the world. These methodological innovations often transverse the tendency to solely rely in academic research on traditional written and oral forms of expression (for example surveys, interviews or fieldnotes in the social sciences) and to conduct research for example through the modes of song, theatre, poetry, photographs, social media, and movement. This involves drawing out people’s experiences of their worlds in ways that acknowledge the past, present and future, as well as the richness of their context and culture (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2008). Creativity in this sense is linked to trying to tap into the imaginative resources that allow us to communicate and access to each other’s social worlds.
The methodologies explored in this book illustrate this commitment to collaborative, participatory, multimodal inquiry and treats research above all as a layered learning process. This requires high levels of reflexivity and examining subjectivity and positionality as an integral part of research process and to ask what is ‘really useful knowledge’ for adult education as a field (Connolly, 2008, see also Etherington, 2004). It involves, we think, sitting with uncertainty and emergence, allowing space and time for the form to emerge as part of the reflective process (Marshall, 2008). Crucially, we also think it means acknowledging the importance of context – in social and relational terms – in thinking about and doing research. Critically reflecting on the research process and ensuring it is consistent with the ethos of adult education throughout all the stages of research becomes paramount.

As noted earlier there is a clear preference for intensive, qualitative methods evident in contemporary adult education (Fejes & Nylander, 2019). But of course there is a risk that this can become an article of faith which blocks or limits critical research. There is also a way of approaching quantitative analysis and conducting mixed methods within a critical perspective that is oriented towards the people with whom we research. This criticality focuses on what is measured and how it is made ‘knowable’ within quantitative and mixed methods approaches and to what end this is used (such as in the use of large-scale datasets in adult literacy or critically questioning the gatekeepers and role of journals in our own field).

Criticality and creativity thus ultimately depend on openness and a willingness to rethink what we do and find new modes of dissemination that engage and empower people. The field of adult education research is changing (not least because of the use of ‘big data’ and the development of social media) and this requires new forms of critical research. Questioning methodological assumptions formed in an earlier period is crucial – for example, does the assumption that a rejection of positivism necessarily means a preference for qualitative approaches really hold good today?

THE ORIGIN OF THE BOOK

This collection of essays emerged from the debates and discussions that took place at the 2016 European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) Triennial conference. Established in 1991 and consisting of twelve different research networks, ESREA has become one of the best-known organizations concerned with academic research on adult education (Slowey, 2016). Its twelve networks meet annually or bi-annually in different parts of Europe. The Triennial conferences offer space for the various networks to come together, meet and share ideas and it has become an important event for adult education researchers globally.

The 2016 Triennial was the eighth such conference and took place in Maynooth University in Ireland, hosted by the Department of Adult and Community Education. The theme of the conference was Imagining Diverse Futures for Adult Education:
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Questions of Power and Resources of Creativity. The double focus on power and resources of creativity was chosen through dialogue between colleagues in ESREA and was designed to respond to concerns about changes with the field which were being voiced at adult education events internationally and within various ESREA networks at this time. This theme was intended to open up and facilitate creative and imaginative responses from adult education researchers to the rapidly changing societal, cultural and political landscape during this time.

It was a remarkably vibrant event with approximately 200 presentations and papers by researchers from 27 countries. These researchers were mainly from Europe but also came Asia, Australia and North America. One of the most important themes of the events was the vitality of critical and creative methodologies in exploring adult learning and in answering wider social challenges. It provided the spark for this book and we wanted to capture some of the methodological diversity evident in the field in order to encourage debate and inspire other researchers. Just as importantly – and this only became clearer afterwards in planning for the book – is the importance of discussing methodology in context; not to separate thinking and doing and to avoid treating methodologies and methods as prescriptions and recipes.

The collection brings together both leading and emerging scholars in adult education research from a range of contexts using a variety of innovative critical and creative methodologies. The authors have been selected to reflect methodological developments in the field and illustrate how this is linked to sustaining, refining and developing critical adult education. Each chapter can be read as a standalone chapter on methodology and theory in research, whilst the book as a whole is intended as a contribution to debates about the status and identity of adult education as a distinctive field of research.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This collection is organized into 8 parts representing key themes in critical and creative research methodologies in contemporary adult education. Part 1 illustrates the rise of biographical and oral history methodologies and explores the importance of story and collective memory in adult education research, while Part 2 discusses the importance of ethnography and reflexivity in research. A range of arts-based research and creative pedagogies is outlined in Part 3 illuminating the nature of creative participatory learning processes. Part 4 outlines the capacity of research to use critical mixed methods and critical quantitative research to critically analyze the larger scale and multiple impacts of adult education processes. Digital research methods are drawn upon in Part 5 to consider how research methods can be developed to investigate digital actants. Part 6 explores the use of multiple media forms of sound, vision and story-telling in participatory research. Part 7 represents research methodologies that use embodied knowledge and movement as participatory methodologies and democratic learning processes. Part 8 concludes the book with an exploration of creative dissemination methods in adult education.
BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH, ORAL HISTORY AND COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING

Part 1 illustrates the rise of biographical and life history methods and explores the importance of storytelling and collective memory in adult education research. Biographical and life history inquiry been one of the most important areas of methodological innovation in adult education research, especially in Europe (Alheit, Bron-Wojciechowska, Brugger, & Dominič, 1995, Merrill & West, 2009, Dominič, 2000). It has been the source of a distinct sociology of adult learning as well as the basis of lifelong learning initiatives, reflexively situating the researcher and acknowledging the co-construction of stories with participants (and this is a theme that runs right through this section and across the book). Drawing on a study of higher education and transitions into work by ‘non-traditional’ students in the UK, Barbara Merrill, a key figure in biographical methods, explores the complexities of doing biographical research from a critical and feminist perspective. She explores the importance of ‘voice’ and dialogue between researcher and participants, linking the ethical and methodological aspects of doing critical research with questions of equality and participation in society as a whole.

Emilio Lucio-Villegas illustrates how the reconstruction of local cultural identities and heritage can enable individuals and communities to build a critical reflection on their life, cultural heritage and the history of their places. This ‘memory work’ requires a specific type of theoretical and methodological approach to work towards a historical reconstruction of a forgotten community which Lucio-Villegas describes through an exploration of an ongoing research project using oral history and photographs. He contends that reconstructing our collective memories through oral histories can enable people to regain their local cultural identities and heritage and become protagonists of their life and regain some of their own power.

Andrea Galimberti, Laura Formenti and Mirella Ferrari explore the methodological implications of using biographical methods as one part of a multiple methods research project to explore the transition to adulthood for young adults from the foster care system. They argue that quantitative data is useful but cannot fully grasp individual differences, learning trajectories, and meanings that are developed by subjects and could explain their choices. Biographical research enables critical research with people in a dynamic co-construction of meanings among interacting people in order to track and understand the paths of life, education and learning of ‘vulnerable’ adults.

Siobhán Madden explores processes of collaborative storytelling as we negotiate the ontological boundaries of written and spoken words in order to disrupt linear narratives of research, education and politics, attending to ‘a temporality of struggle’ (Mohanty, 2003). This is structured through an exploration of three very different text genres which are significant for adult education: policy, research and literary genres. Madden explores the processes of creative transcription and research methodologies in an exciting and novel way whilst disrupting linear narratives of research, education and politics to draw out the central ontological, epistemic and political possibilities of feminist community education.
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THE AUTO/ETHNOGRAPHIC IMAGINATION

Ethnographic research methods have enabled adult education researchers to capture the dynamic and interactive nature of practice in the field in ways which highlight the storied and contextual nature of learning. As a method, it draws on its roots in anthropology and cultural studies to develop a methodological approach which gives a nuanced, contextual, emotive, embodied, linguistic and socio-cultural understanding of everyday learning processes and contexts. Annika Turunen and Ari Sivenius discuss ethnographic methods in adult education research in the context of Nordic study circles, highlighting the contribution of ethnographic methods in its ability to clarify ‘what goes on’, making use of a micro-perspective to bring relevant order into what might seem confusing, or also too familiar. This calls for an interpretive, creative and thoughtful approach where data collection, analysis and reporting are intertwined (Sivenius & Friman, 2017, p. 28). They present key methodological challenges which occur in ethnographic processes in this considered reflection.

The importance of reflexivity and stories in adult education research which is highlighted in Part 1 is also central to the dialogue on auto-ethnographic research methods that David McCormack, Jerry O’Neill, Mary B. Ryan and Tony Walsh give in their chapter. Reflecting on various forms of autoethnography, they present a fascinating dialogue developed and written in collaboration with each other. The space this opens up between writer and reader is considered to be a potential site of meaning making and reader responses are considered to this end. Narrative inquiry and autoethnographic research allows them to catch those subtle processes of human growth and transformation in a way that honors the richness with which adults embrace their own growth and development.

ARTS-BASED RESEARCH AND CREATIVE PEDAGOGIES

Part 3 explores the rise of arts-based research and participatory learning processes in adult education research methods. Arts-based research approaches acknowledge the importance and vitality of finding multiple ways of inquiry and knowing the world using a reflexive, creative and participatory approach to research, highlighting its transformative and multimodal capacity where “in contact with art, people could see and feel more that they could say” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, pp. 507–508). This facilitates participatory approaches to research that deliberately positions the participant as ‘expert’ and the active co-creators of knowledge, creating opportunities for marginalized voices to emerge. Shauna Butterwick and Carole Roy explore how creative expression, as both research methodology and pedagogy, contributes to creating conditions for these voices to be expressed and to be heard, reviewing relevant literature exploring voice and listening, and arts-based inquiry before turning to two cases of arts-based approaches to research on community education and learning through documentary film festival and political fashion shows.
Sarah Meaney explores how the arts-based methods of Forum Theatre and the co-creation of research poetry evokes an emotive and embodied re-presentation of participants’ experiences of educational exclusion and its consequences on their lives. Methods such as transcript poetry reveal how we know the world in emotional, embodied and psychic ways and represent the full richness and complexity of human experience.

Darlene Clover presents a pedagogical, analytical and methodological tool called The Feminist Museum Hack which she designed as a critical and creative means to pay attention to the complex storied and visual culture of museums and what they tell us about gender and patriarchal cultures in the past and today. This draws on feminist research, visual culture, and pedagogical theory and practice, encouraging participants to develop important analytical, narrative and visual competences aimed to create ‘really useful knowledge’ about patriarchal ideologies and how they shape and mobilize particular knowledge and meanings. As a methodology, it disrupts the privileged authority of the museum or gallery, unmasking clear gendered discursive, visual and rhetorical dimensions that hide in plain sight.

CRITICAL MIXED METHODS AND CRITICAL QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

This part explores critical perspectives on quantitative research methods and the use of mixed methods in adult education research. Although there has been a methodological flourishing of different approaches across the social science, quantitative research methods including their use in mixed methods approaches still hold an important place, especially in evidence-based and policy analysis. While mixed methods has been defined as a specific research approach in recent years (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007), the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in research has a long history. The authors in this part demonstrate the ongoing and newer incarnations of mixed methods and their role in adult education research. Alison Taylor and Milosh Raykov offer insightful reflections on their experiences of using mixed methods approaches, arguing for an approach to mixed methods research that is dialogical, creative, critical, and participatory. Their review research highlights how mixed methods approaches means negotiating epistemological and methodological differences as researchers articulate and explore the gains and losses of employing different methods, and what becomes known and captured through research in this process.

Erik Nylander, Lovisa Österlund and Andreas Fejes report on findings from a large-scale bibliographic study conducted on the citation practices within the field of research on adult learning and education. They construct a critical map of the research field based on patterns of citations, theme and concerns to identify dominant players active in the field, and how this is linked to geography, gender and language. This extensive research discloses the hidden assumptions – doxa – and power relations in the scientific field of adult education in a way that allows researchers to situate
their own methodological, theoretical, empirical and dissemination choices in a reflexive manner.

DIGITAL RESEARCH METHODS

Cormac O’Keefe outlines how ethnographic methods can be developed to investigate the construction and operation of digital data and processes in large scale adult skills assessments. This reveals how data are produced and subsequently fed into statistical models to produce outputs that profoundly affect how we understand concepts such as literacy or skill. Drawing upon the theoretical resources of Actor Network Theory, this investigation employs a new and innovative methodology, trace ethnography, to follow the distributed agency of hypermobile digital actants. This, in turn, highlights the role of non-governmental organizations in influencing educational and economic policy-making through the intensification of data production.

SOUND, VISION AND STORYTELLING

Research approaches that are embodied and performance-based are key to recognizing people’s diverse ways of expression, thinking and doing. They are based in participative and creative ways of naming people’s world and offer possibilities for protest and transformations. This often emerges through the telling and retelling/re-presenting of stories over time to reveal learning in motion (Kenyon & Randall, 1997) using songs, photography, arts, drama, dance and other creative forms, such as tapestry making, that have enabled a rich, complex form of expression and documentation of learning.

Creative dissent is not only a crucial part of social movement activism, but is also a key area of social movement learning. Jonathan Langdon, Melissa Jackson and Sophia Kitcher document and explore community action and learning through song and storytelling in Ada Songor salt movement. They share the story of emergence of women’s salt defense movement in Ada, Ghana, demonstrating how creative dissent through song functions in a social movement and in doing so advance research on what Griff Foley (1999) termed ‘learning in struggle’. This illustrates how a participatory research approach, coupled with a methodology sensitive to learning through collective stories and the cultural forms of expression of a community, such as restorying and song, can produce rich meaningful research on adult learning through social movement activism.

Ann Hegarty explores the use of visual research methods through the use of photovoice, an engaging, powerful arts-based research method employed to problematize hegemonic discourses that confine and limit human flourishing. The complex, relationship between constructs of hegemonic masculinities, fatherhood and family literacies are revealed in this visual and discursively-based methodology which is premised on the group’s co-construction of their collective experiences and
meaning-making. A collective, creative exploration of the role of fathers doing family literacy work grounds participants, supporting them to reflect collaboratively on their roles as men and fathers involved in learning care work and highlights how adult education might become a really useful element in their process of radical change.

RESEARCH ON EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND MOVEMENT

Creative research approaches have increasingly highlighted the significance of the embodied basis of how we experience the world. The significance of how we move in and through the world and embodied experience is core to learning is highlighted in the contributions in this part, offering the potential for more reciprocal learning and democratic processes that are contextualized in a multi-sensory way through movement and activity.

In her research Silvia Luraschi explores the active involvement of the body’s perception and movement in the context of vocational guidance. This draws on a constructivist, ecological systems point of view (Bateson, 1972) to explore the complex and varied dimensions of learning (embodied, aesthetic, relational, spatial, etc.). Using this method, Luraschi highlights the importance of dialogue and learning in public spaces in order to acquire creative resources for thinking, feeling and acting in new ways, towards diverse futures.

Peter Ehrström reflects on the use of Deliberative Walks as a participatory method and learning process, building on the deliberative models of Citizens’ Jury and Development Walks and influenced by outdoor pedagogy and place-based learning. Ehrström argues that Deliberative Walks offer a vehicle to learn in a more democratic and complete matter by seeing, observing and feeling in situ, to learn with all your senses and by observing first-hand as well as theoretically. The variation of learning methods and places as well as the possibility to contribute in other ways – by using all senses and having practical knowledge and sense of place – Ehrström contends may enhance political participation and learning.

CREATIVE DISSEMINATION

Vicky Duckworth and Rob Smith highlight the importance of using means of dissemination which are congruent with the participatory, creative and transformative intent of much of adult education research. Their research is based in a sharing of stories between the participants as a dialogical approach that sees research as a social practice (Duckworth & Smith, 2018). The data comprises a series of rich narratives from learners, teachers, employers and learners’ family members collected through video recorded interviews and shared via a project website with a multi-faceted digital platform and interactive critical space. The digital platform is the catalyst to what they describe as a process of virtually enhanced engagement adding to the data and extending the influence and meanings of the project in the public domain to unsettle neo-liberal hegemonic discourses. The chapter theorizes the connection
between a digital, organic research methodology and critical pedagogy in an attempt to model a democratic and dialogical approach to knowledge production.

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