Bridges between individuals and communities: dialogic participation fueling meaningful social engagement

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Abstract

This article presents the narratives of non-academic women who have made essential contributions to their community, and their own lives as well, drawing on their involvement in an adult school. We discuss how dialogic participation in lifelong learning activities may (or may not) prompt people to become active social agents in their communities. Through dialogic participation ordinary individuals whose voices have been always silenced, become active stakeholders in the community they belong to, making relevant contributions, which improve their own lives and the community as well. Drawing on personal narratives we re-construct the trajectories of these women as active social agents in their communities, looking on them through the lenses of their participation in lifelong learning activities. This evidence illustrates how dialogic adult education may become a way for undeserved groups to become empowered and make real changes in our society.

Keywords: dialogic participation, empowerment, dialogic learning, social agents

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Puentes entre individuos y comunidades: la participación dialógica como impulso para el compromiso social

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Resumen

Este articulo presenta las narrativas de mujeres no académicas que han hecho contribuciones esenciales a sus comunidades, y en sus propias vidas, desde su participación en la escuela de persones adultas. Se discute cómo la participación dialógica en el aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida puede (o no) hacer que las personas se conviertan en agentes sociales activos de su comunidad. Mediante la participación dialógica personas corrientes cuyas voces han sido siempre silenciadas, se convierten en miembros activos de la comunidad a la que pertenecen, haciendo contribuciones relevantes y mejorando su propia vida y al mismo tiempo su comunidad. Partiendo de narrativas personales se reconstruyen las trayectorias de estas mujeres como agentes sociales activos en sus comunidades, mirándolas a través de los lentes de su participación en las actividades de aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida. Esta evidencia ilustra cómo la educación dialógica de personas adultas puede servir a grupos infrarrepresentados a sentirse empoderadas y hacer cambios reales en nuestra sociedad.

Palabras clave: participación dialógica, empoderamiento, aprendizaje dialógico, agentes sociales

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The percentage of population aged 65 and over in Europe will raise from 17.4 in 2015 to a 22.8 in 2030 (US Census Bureau, 2013). The European Comission (2006) states that adults' rate of participation in lifelong learning in Spain stood at 9.8% in 2014 and 9.9% in 2015, slightly below the EU average of 10.7% for adults 25-64 year olds.

The European institutions aware of the overall rates of participation in lifelong learning took action. In 2009 Education and Training 2020 (EC, 2009) set four common EU objectives to address challenges in education and training systems by 2020. These were a) making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; b) improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; c) promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; d) enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training. In addition, the European Union set the benchmark that at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning for 2020. In 2015 it was only a 4.1 the percentage of older adults between 50 and 74 years old (Eurostat, 2016) in Spain participating in education and training. The World Economic Forum (2012) defined older adult as people aged 60 and over. Merriam & Kee (2014) argue that community wellbeing can be advanced by promoting lifelong learning among older adults. Most certainly, not all types of lifelong learning may promote social engagement and social transformation. Community wellbeing may be achieved through the development of critical adult education.

This paper is part of a larger research focused on the process of becoming involved in the management of an adult learning center. The larger research investigated how participants interact with each other and with the workers of the center, how they perceived their participation, and what did being part of the management mean for these learners. Furthermore it was studied the aspects of the learning centers that helped to promote social and educational change. First, research was undertaken to examine educational practices within social movements and adult education from the learners' perspective. Second, the study describe and explain different kinds of transformations that learners participation creates in the management of the organizations such as theoretical aspects of education, community social transformations or political transformations. The research concludes that dialogic learning

may support traditionally excluded adults to become empowered while giving them the chance to make real changes in their lives and in their social context as well.

Lifelong learning and participation

Lifelong learning is intrinsically related to adult education and citizenship education. Kristensson Uggla (2008) argued that lifelong learning was originally presented as a multidimensional concept stressing political, social, personal as well as cultural and economical purposes alike. Often lifelong learning has been recognized as an integral part of a strong democratic commitment concerning the importance of equal opportunities. The concept gained force in the mid 1990s with an OCDE report and the promotion from the EU. It had been before mentioned in strategic focus of UNESCO in early 1970s by Faure although the idea was first fully articulated by authors such as Lindeman and Yeaxlee in late 1920s influenced by Dewey.

Numerous scholars and practitioners recognize the centrality of participation in adult education and this is a topic that has promoted abundant research. The participation of the adult learners studied often has to do with how they feel they are treated and, with which kind of opportunities and spaces of participation they find in the center for adult education. This topic is an outstanding aspect, mainly within the factor that lifelong learning is one of the ever present elements in the educational agendas of countries and international organizations such as the European Union, UNESCO, etc. Research carried out over the past decades assures that education is a key element for being included in the present information society.

According to the previous research the participation of adults in lifelong learning is also connected to the contentment of the community. Park, Lee and Dabelko-Schoeny (2016) argue that mature learners participating in lifelong learning programs have had the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge but also expand new social networks with people of different ages which in turn among others has increased the adults emotional satisfaction. The authors stated that lifelong learning programs have further support older adults health and well-being leading to more successful aging besides meeting their educational needs. Merriam and Kee (2014) highlight

that the relationship between lifelong learning and community wellbeing is argued from a social capital perspective. This framework contends that formal, nonformal, and informal learning activities of older adults promote an active and engaged lifestyle that helps create and preserve community. They describe community wellbeing as the function of many factors working in concert to promote an optimal quality of life for all members of a community. The authors also describe that "learning in older adulthood not only reduces dependency on government-funded social services but actually enhances personal and community wellbeing" (Merriam & Kee, 2014, p.133). Field (cited in Merriam & Kee, 2014, p.134) "linked lifelong learning, social capital, and wellbeing in arguing that "participation in learning tends to enhance social capital, by helping develop social competencies, extending social networks, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others (p.23)".

Tellado (2012) argues that successful experiences such as Highlander Folk School and the Highlander Research and Educational Centre are the ones in which there are routes and channels for the participants to share their points of view and where they feel respected. She argues that there are important issues in the study of the organization and functioning of the adult education centres that have a direct impact and consequences on the participation of adult individuals. These aspects are democracy, participation, dialogue, a critical review of the educator role inside and outside of the classroom, the ability of participants deciding what education they want, lifelong learning, and power relations in the structures of decision-making inside the school and creating spaces of identity among others.

In this article, evidence will be provided on the effects on inclusion and participation of the active involvement in the management of the adult education centre and lifelong learning activities which prior research (Merriam and Kee, 2014) indicates that enhances personal and community wellbeing. Narratives of older women experiences will be presented as examples participating in adult education which has allowed them to continue active and highly participative in their communities, which is also part of their wellbeing.

Dialogic learning in the context of lifelong learning

In order to encourage groups and individuals to take ownership and a leading role in their educational experience dialogic approach on adult education should be at the center of their lifelong learning process. A dialogic approach on adult education derive from an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, including Freire's (1997) dialogic pedagogy, Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action, and Flecha's (2000) dialogic learning. All of them recognize the significance of learners' participation and the possibility of change in society.

Flecha's dialogic learning (2000) suggests the importance of creating spaces of dialog in which egalitarian dialog is feasible. For that reason it is important to acknowledge that every person has the capacity to contribute to dialogs, that is, that everybody is a subject of speech and action, in the words of Habermas (1984). Dialogic learning is based in 7 key principles. First, the idea of egalitarian dialog: all individuals have to have the same opportunity to contribute with their own point of view, each one different, based in their own life and cultural experiences. In addition, the education should respond to a principle of transformation, that is, it should be a tool for the person to overcome situations of exclusion and be able to face new challenges. The transformation also makes reference to the changes that the individual feels when learning new knowledge that allows him or her to be more autonomous, for example this is the case of a person who learns to read and write and the need for help diminishes when living in literate spaces such as the supermarket where all the aisles have the name of the products. Learning is also a process of meaning creation. This is another of the principles of dialogic learning. It means that learning becomes an activity full of meaning for the person and it is through that meaning making that (at least in adult education) people learn. When the individual understands the concept, that moment is when learning occurs. Another element is solidarity. Learning is always a solidarity process in which people share points of view, ways of doing, explanations and knowledge that is how people learn from the others, because knowledge is collective and shared. Another principle of the dialogic learning is equality of differences. That means that all the

individuals have the same opportunities for learning, that it is not so important their prior training or how they have acquired the knowledge. The important part is to achieve the knowledge of the ideas being studied, but each person will do it from their own position. Some will have more facility to connect the ideas being learned to their experience in their daily lives, while others will prefer a more scholarly and academic approach. All the approaches (if those achieve learning) are valid, and of all the different ways to solve a situation the richest is the classroom interactions. This principle is connected to the principle of cultural intelligence, that is to say that all individuals have intelligence. To say that intelligence is characteristic of a particular approach is wrong. On the contrary, knowledge takes many forms, and in every culture can be different, but equally valid if those point to achieving knowledge on a subject matter. The last of the principles of the dialogic learning is the instrumental dimension of learning. Dialog does not substitute the contents that have to be learned. The dialogic learning puts in common different ways to acquire this knowledge, but all the individuals should have the same opportunity to learn them and to acquire them in all their forms (both in academically and non academic ways). For example, learning to read and write can be both a scholarly process, in which people repeat a series of graphs and handwriting in their notebooks until this person recognizes and gives (creates) meaning for those symbols in front of him or her, or it can also be a dialogic process in which the person starts with words that have some meaning for him or her and from there starts generating other words from the same family (method of generative words by Paulo Freire). The same happens with mathematics: a person could solve a problem applying the corresponding algorithm, or he or she could reason on the basis of his or her experience and solve it in another way (Díez-Palomar, 2015; Díez-Palomar, Giménez & Garcia Wehrle, 2006; Simic-Muller, 2015). In the end everybody should be able to use both approaches.

Dialogic participation in lifelong learning activities may prompt people to become active social agents in their communities. Researchers have long been interested in who participates and the rationale for their participation. The research of Soler's on dialogic reading (2001) or Padrós' criteria to define democratic adult education (2008). The criteria are to include the voice of adult learners and the creation of flexible structures that allow adult

individuals to participate in the management of the adult school with the final aim of becoming a democratic adult education centre. This type of adult education implements successful educational actions that yield academic results and contribute to the personal transformation of individuals who participate in adult education and to the social transformation of their environment (Elboj, 2014; Flecha & Soler, 2013).

This prior research points out that regardless of the academic background of an individual by means of learning in a dialogic context their role as learners is strengthened as the key decision makers of the project as well as the representatives of the whole center (Padrós, 2008, p. 243): "participants were proposed to organize associations with the objective to get autonomy, opportunity to get projects, to organize activities and this is how the participant people started to meet together and legalize it ... now the associations are the school and easily overcome the number of participants, activities, projects, capacity to organize any of the adult schools depending on the administration of the neighborhood (Giner, 2011, p. 77)". Dialogic adult education is a tool for undeserved groups to become empowered and make real changes and contributions in their contexts.

An example of successful educational forms of participation in adult education

An example of participatory democracy and dialogic approach is the successful experience of Dialogic Literary Gatherings (Flecha, 2000, Soler, 2001). Dialogic literary gatherings (Flecha, 2000) are a concrete example of the interactive and dialogic interpretation mentioned by Vygotsky (1978), Bakhtin (1981), Soler (Searle & Soler, 2004) and Flecha (2000). It is a reading program that promotes both personal and contextual transformation. By means of social participation the dialogic literary gatherings not only promotes literacy skills for the participants but also self-confidence and social inclusion. Through this experience, adults who have never read a book come to read, discuss, and enjoy classic books by authors such as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Émile Zola, and Federico García Lorca. By share readings, people without academic degrees, most of them involved in becoming literate, read and discuss classic works of literature.

The Dialogic Literary Gatherings are dialogic learning contexts based on dialogic models of teaching and learning to read and learn from universal classic literature. It draws on the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1962, 1978). It also shares basic principles of Freire's (1973) 'culture circles' and of dialogic learning (Flecha, 2000). The dialogic literary gatherings based on these theories and practices were created to overcome the fixedness of reproduction theory and the deficit perspectives which end up preventing adults of disadvantaged social classes from accessing this type of culture (Bourdieu, 1984).

Methodology

The study here presented is a qualitative study. The reason why I decided to use a methodological approach solely qualitative was my interest in doing this research to understand how adult learners perceive their participation in a center for adults that is managed in a dialogical approach. A quantitative approach would have provided a descriptive picture of this reality, but my interest was to gather the voices of the participant individuals, who are the real protagonists, to explain from their own personal experiences and their own practices how they perceive and how they understand their participation in their adult school.

My interest is to analyze what happens when a dialogic model of management is used to manage an adult education center and how dialogic participation in lifelong learning activities prompt people to become active social agents in their communities. For that reason, I conducted a case study in a school of Barcelona that follows this organizational model. The school selected for the study, the School of La Verneda Sant Marti, has been widely recognized by the international scientific community (Sánchez, 1999) and that took part in the origins of the learning communities (Elboj, Puigdellívol, Soler & Valls, 2002), one of the most successful educational experiences in Spain in recent years. On the other hand, my purpose with this study was to create a space in which both the voices of the adult learners attending the school as well as the voice of educators that work in this field could be heard because these people are the real protagonists of adult education. For that reason I decided to locate my study in the frame of the

critical communicative methodology (Gómez, Latorre, Sánchez & Flecha, 2006; Flecha & Gómez, 2004). This methodological approach comes from the critical revision of prior research paradigms such as the quantitative, the constructivist or the socio-critical methodology, and especially highlights the idea that social reality (what really interests us to study) is a reality of communicative nature. That means that it is a human construction by which meanings are created through dialog that people hold to give meaning to things and processes around us. This approach takes especial care to include the voices of all the participants (in one way or another) in the topic of study. This is what motivated me to select this methodological approach in conducting a case study under the parameters of the critical communicative methodology.

Research design

In a first round of data collection the choice of a communicative case study as a methodological approach allowed me to center in depth in the analysis of the individuals participating in the school using several techniques (in depth communicative interviews, communicative focus groups and communicative observations) obtaining a detailed understanding of the reality studied. On the one hand, obtaining of data from different proceedings allowed me to contrast and compare information during the analysis through triangulation of the different sources used.

Later with the aim of developing a longitudinal study, a second round of one-to-one in depth interviews were undertaken 10 years later with the older adults. A total of 14 learners were interviewed, two of them participated in the two rounds of data collection. Bertaux and Kohli (1984) indicate that "biographies are global constructions by which individuals constitute a defined present within the specific horizons of the past and the future" (p.222). I interviewed participants with different backgrounds and with different years of experience participating at the center. Those in depth interviews helped me to understand what their lifelong experience were and how adult learners perceive their participation. The questions focused on the participants' experiences which help to capture the meaning of being involved in the community and the management of the center. These

interviews were communicative in depth interviews because through dialog researcher and researched reached agreements on their interpretations.

Participants

The recruitment of research participants was purposeful. The participants were intentionally chosen to examine significant and successful cases in order to analyze the elements that made them successful. Women participating in the research are "other women", that is to say, women participating in adult education that have no academic qualifications or background (Puigvert, 2001). Participation was voluntary. The in depth interviews questions were related to the participants' educational histories, gender and aging as well as lifelong learning experiences and social activism. They are women older than 65 years old who are learners and some of them also volunteers in the adult education center.

Instruments of data collection

The interview questions were directly targeted to specific educational experiences and their relationship with social activism, for example: in which ways do you see that your educational experience relates to your activism? In which situations are you aware that you are politically active? In what ways does active participation matters to you in your historical and social context? What specific educational activities made you become socially engaged? What type of activity make you become aware that you were being socially engaged? These questions were posed initially in the first round of interviews in 2006 and posed again in 2016. Therefore the study was replicated.

The interviews were conducted by the author and lasted approximately 45 to 70 minutes. They took place at the school of adults of the participants of the study or in their homes. All the interviews were recorded, and made verbatim transcriptions based on the recordings. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, and the quotations used in this article have been translated by the author using both direct linguistic and socio-cultural

translation. The interviewees gave their oral or written informed consent to participate. Pseudonyms were used.

The data was analyzed in two phases. The analysis was supported by the use of MAXQDA2 computer software. The first phase focused on identifying themes explaining learners' perceptions of their participation in the dialogic management of the center. The second phase of analysis was conducted to investigate the transformational and the
exclusionary factors perceived by learners of this center.

Results

The results are presented under three themes solidarity, readiness for equity and innovative practices, and transformation directly influencing self-esteem, civic engagement and empowerment.

Solidarity

Participants described their learning experiences in which they were able to speak up about their own interests, needs, and rights and promote solidarity with other human beings who have also been silence.

> When a person expresses herself and explains the feelings that a book has brought her to say, think, and feel, this really moves me. In the literary circle I learn much more than in the books themselves . . . I learn from the people, and I know I have also contributed, like everybody else. (Participant of a Dialogic Literary Circle)

Therefore examples such as the quoted above illustrate how people in the above situations of exclusion start to participate in order to actually become active members in their local agencies, in the schools of their children, promoting dialogue and solidarity, and causing great impact in their families and communities.

The most important consequence of this approach is the inclusion of the voices of the participants that otherwise will not be represented. Therefore, this approach is a way to stimulate the participation and the involvement of everybody.

> P4: But I think that the main characteristic of this management is the inclusion of the collectives namely excluded in all and each of the phases of management, in this case they are not in the margins, they are inside, they take part and are part of each and every phase, we are talking in this case of projects, of managing a particular activity, or being in class, no? In any moment the participants can say what they think and manage that area. (Interview with Clara)

In addition, solidarity also involves other topics such as diversity and inclusion.

> P3: There are people from very different levels, nationalities the same that in the classroom, there are people who are Arab, people of color, and their participation is the same as any other person, we all have the same freedom to talk and no discrimination. Nothing. There is no discrimination because you are from somewhere else, or because you are from here. We are participants, we are working together for an idea, and each of use make proposals, of course maybe a person is from Arab origin wants to learn Catalan or Spanish, and for example another person already knows it, but wants to learn English, but I want to say, it is the same, in the board, in all the group, she or he has the same, there is no discrimination. Another thing that happens in all the groups is that we respect each other opinions, no? There is always a chairperson, that takes notes for the minutes of the group, and this chairperson also writes down who wants to talk and gives turns so we all respect each other turn and we listen to each other and these people feel integrated and they are very happy participating in the meetings and

> everything. I don't do any, there is no discrimination they
> participate in everything, all the same.
> (Interview with Maria)

Readiness for equity and innovative practices

The learners experiences of being respected and the appreciation of their
contributions regardless of their achieved level of formal schooling
transcends into many spheres.

The following quote is from a person who explains in the interview that,
the fact of not knowing another person with whom they are sharing the
meeting is not relevant. The important fact is that all the people participating
in the school know that their opinion is valuable. This fact makes them feel
valued and with more confidence to express their points of view.

> I: How would you describe the interaction of the participants
> among them?
> P2: Let's see many start deep bonds and let me say some people
> realized that many didn't know anybody when they got here,
> and meeting here in the school, starting in the same level,
> learning together those are really deep ties they are living
> common experiences and you can see that. For example, today,
> one woman was telling another to explain her something, she
> started telling how she does it, and you see how the first one
> was looking at her with affection like saying thank you with
> your eyes, you know? It has even moved me or the help that a
> man with mental disability was offering another women
> because he knew how to do that, those are very especial bonds
> and that will be impossible if it wasn't in this school of dialog.

From a personal and emotional point of view the effect that this approach
has on people is very important. Many of the participants are people who
come from spaces in which what they have to say they have not been taken
into account and they have to face new situations and their fears. For that
reason, the possibility to establish an egalitarian relationship with all the

people in the school is a very important aspect for their own motivation and self-esteem, as well as for their continuous participation in the school. Just as this participant explains in her interview:

> I: How would you describe the feeling you have when you walk into the school, that everybody says hello to each other, that there is this atmosphere that you are fine, how would you describe it?
> P7: Well, that is like if you were at home, it is very easy, if you come inhibited, thinking who am I going to find? And then, in reality they treat you so well, and the people is so nice that in two days you are relaxed and you feel you have come to this school all your life. (Interview with Manuela)

The result, just like another participant person states is that it improves your life. The possibility of making decision about your own life allows you to have more autonomy, you go to places with more self-confidence and this way, like this participant says, you feel that more doors open your way wherever you go. Like she says, the school gives you life.

> P2: One thing I have to say of this school is that it has improved many peoples life in many ways, improving their work life, improving many areas, it has opened many doors to plenty of places, and I think it is something that has given us life! I think that if you are ok it gives you well-being, the school is something that enriches you, and values people. (Interview with Lucia)

Transformations

Social transformations appear connected to the dialogic learning experiences that provide self-esteem, self- confidence and self-awareness to adult learners. These experiences serve to put in practice validity claims to support

a statement and therefore it serves as a platform for later actions and initiatives that take place outside of the school walls.

The following quote supports the idea of personal transformation emphasizing the emotional impact that had for these people their participation in the school. The overcoming of personal barriers is another of the achievements obtained with an approach such as dialogic management, because spaces in which the people feel with confidence are created, and this is the first step to overcome the difficulties that people may find throughout life.

> I: Which transformations do you think the school has done?
> P2: Oh yes in the neighborhood, transformations of the neighborhood. But the most radical transformations I won't say have been in the neighborhood but the people, many people I am telling you today there was a woman that reads a little and she was saying with tears in her eyes I didn't know how to read and write or nothing, because my husband use to do all that and now I can another woman says I had to work and I didn't know, I saw that all of them were sign in and I ask to one woman to write my name and then I will go and copy it, I didn't know what was written is the transformation of the person! You feel good, happy; you feel I don't know. That the ignorant is the person who has to say ups, I forgot my glasses!... before I had to ask, and say I don't understand, but now I know how to write. This is the independence of the person, independence. (Interview with Lucia)

Another of the main achievements of this dialogic approach from the social transformation point of view is the creation of dialog spaces in which everybody respects each other. This is a basic element for the development of a democratic attitude and a critical and responsible citizenry.

> I: Which kind of transformations do you think the school has done to the participants?

P3: The transformations are always very obvious and are one of the things that most emotion creates. In your daily work. There are a lot of transformations, for example, learning to listen. And with this one, also to respect other people s opinion and value the differences, this is very important. Another important issue is the respect of the human rights. (Interview with Justa)

The quote of this woman reflects on becoming socially engaged due to the participation in the women's group of the adult education school.

I: What type of activity make you become aware that you were being socially engaged?
P5: In the women group we explain how it works. We do not talk about superficial topics. It is neither a therapy group nor a space to complain about things. We discuss issues that happen in society on topics that we want to learn more, like gender violence or unfair or discriminatory treatment of women at work or once they get pregnant. We then participate in the district, or on the federation of associations or in a conference. Once a month we demonstrate in the square in front of the City Hall reading a statement against gender violence. Of course you change, I have seen women attending demonstrations for the first time or a conference. You can recognize that they become more critical but with knowledge, we have discuss it together, now they know more now. (Interview with Maria)

Discussion and Conclusions

The interviewed women offered many testimonies about what it means for them being involved in the center and the community. It means a personal transformation: many of the participants come from environments where they are not taken into account, their contributions were not valued and neither their opinions nor points of view. Then, they get to a center where their voice is important, in which there are spaces where they can participate without fear, freely and in which who they are and what they say is valued.

At the personal level there are resounding changes. For many women I interviewed (and this is also common to men participants of the school), their participation in the school means, above all, an affirmation of their personal identity. On the other hand, it also means a transformation in the social level. The interviewed people state that suddenly they start participating in activities of the neighborhood, in demonstrations and other spaces such as associations and organizations, which benefits them in their identity as critical democratic actors. In any case, the fact of being involved in the community means for these people to take an active role that they did not have previously.

Puigvert (2001) argues that participation of non-academic women in processes of dialogic learning has had a great impact in the same adult school. Women transform their relations when they introduce the egalitarian dialogue in their lifeworlds, with their husbands, sons, relatives, and friends, and they do so when they get in contact with dialogic spaces, like in the adult school. In these dialogic spaces, they can reflect, explain their personal situations, and relate in solidarity with other women like them.

Non-traditional adult education learners and "other women" through dialogic adult education seem that not only improve their educational needs, individual and community wellbeing (Merriam & Kee, 2014; Park, Lee and Dabelko-Schoeny, 2016) but also enhances community activism for the common good through social engagement.

Participants of the adult school that follows a dialogic approach of lifelong learning hold dialogues and amplify their points of view on issues of ethical decision-making, authority, power and leadership, conflict in life as well as issues of sex, race, class, age, sexual orientation and disabilities. They speak, listen, negotiate meanings and exchange standpoints to end up unpacking stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination on historical and daily life situations.

For Freire (1997) the concept of "unity in diversity" is central and embodies the notion that dialogue and unity among different people, unity in the diversity of their origins and life projects, are necessary to enable individuals to fight for decent living conditions and to respect different ways of being. For example in the dialogic literary gathering there is only respect, knowledge creation and contributions for everybody's growth. In this

learning space there is neither top down teaching nor banking education. All participants, regardless of their educational background, share on the same level. This experience has allowed low literate women to fearlessly hold dialogues with university professors and politicians when required, being able to defend with validity claims and arguments their thoughts.

The personal narratives of the participating women as active social agents in their communities are an example of Freire's idea of dialogic experience. Freire (1997) states that "dialogic experience is fundamental for building epistemological curiosity. Dialogue also implies a critical posture; it implies a preoccupation with the raison d'être of the objects that mediates the subjects of the dialogue" (p.100). The learning experiences on of women in the adult school transcend to their social context because the dialogue held in the dialogic literary gatherings or the women groups besides respectful and egalitarian it is also denotes a critical posture.

Dialogic participation in lifelong learning has stimulated the advancement towards democratic adult education and a much more social engaged community since individuals become aware and take up action against discrimination, inequalities and violence. This is the case of the participants of the women's group who become more critical with the experiences lived by many women like gender violence because they have discussed and held dialogues on violence, inequalities, power relationships, overcoming inequalities and strive for social change and justice. These dialogues exemplify the impact of dialogic learning (Flecha, 2000) in opening opportunities for critical engagement in the community and building active agency.

The study aligns with John Dewey's view that the meanings of experiences are constructed in a continuum of the past and the future. In this research paper narrative techniques were used to report three main themes that emerged from the participants' accounts, which have implications for increasing empowerment and social agency; solidarity, readiness for equity and innovative practices and transformation. The study contributes to the increasingly significant discussion of lifelong learning relevance for older adults' skills and abilities, and challenges the assumptions of what is determined for low-skill older adults as adult education.

In conclusion, lifelong learning for older adults is a meaningful social activity, it is not an activity to simply entertain older adults. The experiences lived in the daily life of a democratic adult education centre makes older adults reflect on life past events, in present reality and allow them to dream and act on the future. The lifelong learning experience of the participating women of this research helps them to define their actions and to be informed in their actions. Therefore lifelong learning can become the bridge between individuals and communities through dialogic participation for social engagement.

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