



Thematic issue of RELA: Learning in times of Crisis

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We hereby invite contributions to a thematic issue on learning in times of crisis. Do we learn anything? How do we learn? What do we learn? And, what role does adult education play in this? In particular, the thematic issue is about how and what we individually and collectively learn in times of crisis and from disruptive societal crises and threatening problems. We invite contributions from many different contexts, but seek to pay specific attention to elucidating the learning and educational processes that relate to questions regarding the sustainability of our societal systems and the ecological challenges facing the world.

The starting point is that human learning processes are basically rooted in life experiences - both the sedimented and reflected summaries of one's overall life course, and the current experiences. In general, our daily lives are characterized by relatively strong routines that help to make life clear and obvious. This shapes a perception of the world that connects the understanding of the objective world, the relationships with other people and possible futures, as a reality that one can and often has to relate to. Early in life, most children acquire some kind of ontological security: a certainty about who they are, where and how they are grounded in their lived environment. This forms the basis for everyday life experiences, identity processes and a capacity for imagination.

This everyday life consciousness is often collectively supported through shared understanding and mutual identification. Crises then are situations that seriously, often all of a sudden, challenge this relatively certain conception of reality: changes in the objective world, in one's space for possible actions, in one's relationships. There are individual crises that "only" relate to personal life, such as a serious life-changing illness, a divorce or being made redundant in the world of work. But what interests us in the thematic issue are those sudden changes in societal conditions that also shake individual and micro-social relationships, the Covid-19 epidemic being a clear example: people getting unemployed suddenly, or having to work from home in combination with family care, schools being closed and, in certain countries people were not even allowed to leave their homes, apart from purchasing necessary supplies. These kinds of crises have the potential to provide new insights, change routines, enhance utopias or develop new practices that would have been unimaginable before. Crises, thus, may elicit a process of recognition, integrating new knowledge, emotional commitment and notions of what it means for oneself, but also for a collective situation and life practices of humankind. Yet, it is far from evident that the people involved in crises learn anything. They may hope that 'business as usual' is reinstalled as soon as possible. On the other hand, a crisis can be so emotionally overwhelming that all attention is concentrated on defense mechanisms. This could even feed into highly irrational and destructive social currents. Whether we learn something,



what we learn and what dynamics surround such learning processes are the questions we hope to elucidate through empirical and theoretical contributions to this theme. We will briefly exemplify what types of analysis we initially think can provide insights into these issues.

The latest pervasive crisis is the Corona pandemic. This pandemic has two layers that are intertwined. Basically, the cause of the crisis is biological: a disease threat. The fact that an infectious virus creates a pandemic disease has to do with both its biological functioning and our lack of knowledge of it (infectiousness, long incubation period with unknown infectiousness, an unknown diversity in disease course), but also with social conditions. Globalization has dramatically shortened the path from a Chinese food market to the whole world. But apart from societal conditions that have facilitated the pandemic impact of this virus, the second layer of the crisis is the political handling of the threat in the form of drastic national lockdowns in large parts of the world – first, in China, then in the Asian neighboring countries, and finally in Europe and other parts of the world.

There is little doubt that the pandemic leaves strong experiences. Entire populations have become amateur epidemiologists. But that does not mean that the most important experience is about viruses. The Corona pandemic is perhaps more anxiety-provoking than many other infectious diseases by its novelty and by its very diverse disease-causing nature. Even at a low “pressure of infection” there is a basis for individual anxiety. Taken together, it creates a certain mystique, an ontological insecurity, which enables a potential for projecting a wide range of (other) anxiety-provoking conditions on this disease - that is, a "condensation" of all possible anxiety potentials in relation to this virus. But what experience will the well-founded fear and perhaps more diffuse anxiety leave behind?

There is the peculiarity of an epidemic that the biological threat drastically affects the social: it is social life and the community that become dangerous. In order to control and block this threat, social life must be put under severe control. The nature of the crisis is primarily shaped politically by the definition of the Corona threat and the mitigation strategies used. Institutional and policy interventions have transformed a biological phenomenon into a crisis of social, economic and cultural nature and dimension. On the other hand, the sudden emergence of crisis may give rise to new understandings of expertise and knowledge, and of the (un)controllability of living conditions. One can imagine that the political handling of the threat at national and international level will have an impact on the understanding of the (nation) state's importance, and thus the crisis will leave quite different, but eventually also common experiences in different countries.

Although not in the same way as in the Corona crisis, the ecological crisis, and particularly the crisis of global warming, is a threat arising from the conditions of nature and an interplay of scientific knowledge, political interpretation and popular opinion. But while the pandemic has been able to see "science" primarily as a potential "cure" (vaccine), science in the climate context is sometimes considered as the creator of the crisis when documenting the necessity of uncomfortable and demanding new behavior, and undermining people's understanding of their own opportunities. The scientific documentation of global warming is far less tangible than the illness and death produced by the Corona crisis. It is partly prognostic, it cannot be seen immediately, it is relatively technical and abstract, and immediately appears as a truth that must be accepted because of the credibility of the messenger ("the science") - and has therefore also more easily been the object of denial.



Its emotional appeal is limited and its wide-ranging consequences are difficult to understand - for example, how migrant flows are the result of altered climatic conditions. Yet, 'climate change is a pandemic in slow motion'¹.

These considerations indicate that crises have the potential to initiate very basic and comprehensive experiences and learning processes, but the individual and collective outcome of such learning and education is unpredictable and contradictory. At present, little research has been done on the Corona crisis. However, we especially hope to mobilize research that has analyzed experiences and learning processes related to the Corona pandemic and other societal crises of that scale, such as the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the 2008 international financial crisis, the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, the 2015 migration crisis in Europe and the lasting ecological crisis. We are particularly interested in contributions that thematize the interaction between scientific expertise, political interpretation and management of problems, and the emotional and practical circumstances that influence the popular experience of the crisis - including, of course, individual and social learning processes and, if so, changed views in response to the crisis.

The young generation is currently taking the lead in popular action. On December 14th 2018 Greta Thunberg, a fifteen year old Swedish girl, addressed the world leaders at the United Nations Climate Conference in Katowice (Poland) with the following words. 'You only speak of the green eternal economic growth, because you are too scared of being unpopular. You only talk of moving forward, with the same bad ideas that got us into this mess, even though the only sensible thing to do is pull the emergency brake. You are not mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden you leave to us children. But I don't care about being popular. I care about climate justice and the living planet'. Time has come for radical change, was her message. Her example inspired thousands of young people to march the streets in several continents. The actions of the young challenge the adults². Climate scientists are increasingly vocal about the necessary measures to avoid further damage. Politicians do not know very well how to react in the first place: take the young seriously, try to recuperate the new mass movement or deny the relevance of their claims. However, most observers agree about one thing: there is no way to escape the debate and the taking of necessary, urgent measures any longer. Also, the role of education is discussed intensively, particularly the role of school education. But also adult education can play an important role in deepening and furthering the debate. The broad societal awakening on sustainability issues raises questions on what role adult education and adult educators have been playing until now, and what role they can play in the future.

There is a long tradition in education, particularly in citizenship education, sustainability education, workers' education, literacy education, popular education, etc.. dealing with questions on how to enhance the awareness of people concerning major societal issues. Most of these approaches intend to make a connection between individual experiences and societal issues, or try to turn private concerns into public issues and into collective

¹ Rob Wijnberg in 'De Correspondent'. <https://decorrespondent.nl/11220/waarom-klimaatverandering-eeen-pandemie-in-slow-motion-is-en-wat-we-daarvan-kunnen-leren/287568600-7a1153b9>

² <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/europe-climate-change-protests-teens>



social utopias. Along with these traditions, approaches have been developed in the course of the twentieth century and beyond, that theorize the educational/learning processes related to the development of critical thinking. Prominent authors such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, Jürgen Habermas, Oskar Negt, Jack Mezirow, bell hooks and Yrjö Engeström have particularly influenced non-formal adult education practices dealing with learning in and from conditions of crisis. In addition, authors like Lave and Wenger have presented theories on social learning in communities. More recently authors like Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière and Bruno Latour have questioned classical notions of critical thinking and enlightenment, thereby influencing theorists and practitioners of adult education to reconsider their ambitions, orientations and practices. And currently the concept of ‘public pedagogy’ is an attempt to theoretically integrate various practices and theories of non-formal education, in connection with public issues, into an overarching framework.

Papers related to such theories and practices would definitely be of value in this thematic issue. However, it is not our intention to limit the contributions to institutional adult education or targeted learning processes. We also aim at a broader comprehension of learning related to societal and historical conditions. Therefore, we are not so interested in contributions that primarily dissect crises, their causes and processes. These contexts are of interest only to the extent that they can be translated into a more nuanced understanding of the complexity and possible directions that experience formation and learning can take.

Contributions in line with these general directions should be submitted to the online system of RELA (<https://www.rela.ep.liu.se/>) by the 15th of November 2020.