

## Civic lifelong education: fostering informed citizenship amidst global challenges and democratic transformations [Editorial]

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## Civic lifelong education: fostering informed citizenship amidst global challenges and democratic transformations

Amidst times of wars, societal conflicts, global climate change and polarisations that are perceived as threats to democratic coexistence, there is a recurring call in the public discourse for the strengthening of civic lifelong education (Banks et al., 2023; Hurtado, 2019; Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & Kennedy, 2022; Petrie et al., 2019). The pressing need to foster an informed and engaged citizenry becomes increasingly evident as societies grapple with complex challenges and the erosion of democratic values. In this editorial, we delve into the significance of civic adult education in fostering sustainable democracies and explore the potential avenues for further research in this field. The editorial also aims to explore the significance of civic lifelong education in the aftermath of the Russian war against Ukraine, reflecting on its implications and the imperative for further research in this domain.

This journal has a long tradition to focus on engagement with civic lifelong education research. So, the concept of 'citizen' and its associated topic of 'Citizenship and its learning' has emerged as a prominent and recurring theme throughout the 2010 decade and even prior to that (Holford et al., 2022). This emphasis on citizenship reflects a recognition of the vital role that lifelong education plays in fostering active and engaged citizens. By examining the multifaceted aspects of citizenship, from its theoretical foundations to its practical implications, the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* contributes to the ongoing dialogue on how adult learning can foster civically responsible individuals who actively contribute to their communities and strive for positive societal change (e.g. Bananuka & Mugarra, 2023; Li, 2017; Ngozwana, 2017). This editorial considers aligning with the longstanding tradition of exploring the intersection of citizenship and adult learning in the field of education, and also emphasises the need to extend this research focus beyond the 2010 decade – exemplifying the Russian war against Ukraine as a major current crisis and searching for possible educational responses.

This emphasis on civic adult education has also a global dimension. Thus, the GRALE V (Global Report on Adult Learning and Education) published by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL, 2022) places citizenship and civic education at its centre, recognising the crucial role they play in adult learning and education. The report states that nearly 74% of countries are developing or implementing policies related to citizenship education, emphasising its growing importance in addressing contemporary challenges. By placing citizenship and civic education at the forefront, the report reinforces the need to prioritise research, policy development, and practice in adult civic education to address the evolving needs of societies and support active and engaged citizens. Additionally, in this journal, we have highlighted the lack of studies focusing on civic education and civic engagement in the Global South. Civic adult education in these regions is often neglected in scholarly research and public discussions, warranting greater attention (Bananuka & Mugarra, 2023).

Among lifelong education practitioners and scholars, there have been significant voices criticising the lacking attention of the field to questions of democracy. Three decades ago, Boggs (1991) made an important argument about the crucial role of adult education in serving democracy. He posited that, above all other purposes it may serve, the primary contribution of adult education in a democratic society is civic education. Failure to do so would relegate adult education to the periphery of this vital aspect of adult life and contribute to the ongoing trend

of privatisation in society. The improper focal points of adult education had been deprecated already in the 1980s. For instance, according to Boggs (1991), Jack Mezirow complained to professors of adult education about ‘the drift of the field of Adult Education from its original concern as an enterprise driven by social ideals to one overwhelmingly market driven’ (cit. in: Boggs, 1991, p. 49). In this journal, Baptiste (1999) raised a pertinent critique regarding the diversion of attention by adult educators from ‘serious human plights to narrow personal and technical considerations’ (p. 94). Furthermore, he advocates for a shift in the discipline, and criticises the prevailing approaches in adult education of the time, from critical theory to self-directed learning, arguing that they fall short by assuming that equalising the distribution of valued information and skills alone can alleviate social maladies (Baptiste, 1999). To truly promote civically responsible change, Baptiste (2000) asserts that adult education must engage politically to ‘neutralise oppressive forces’ (p. 101), going beyond mere knowledge dissemination to what he later calls his ‘pedagogy of coercive restraint’, arguing that coercion as a pedagogical tool is justified when grave social injuries are sustained.

The risk of over prioritising other aspects of adult education over civic learning has lost nothing of its relevance today: it appears that educational content aimed at promoting understanding of the complex challenges facing citizens in a democratic society is taking a backseat. Rather than cultivating critical citizens who can actively participate in political processes and take responsibility, the focus seems to be on business aspects and individual success. This shift in emphasis is concerning and raises questions about the role of civic education in modern society (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021).

The emphasis on organisational efficiency and personal enrichment may be understandable for pragmatic reasons, as employers and individuals seek tangible outcomes and benefits from lifelong education. However, it also leads to a neglect of addressing broader social issues and fostering critical thinking, democratic values, and ethical responsibility within adult education practices (Holst, 2021).

Only through such holistic education can we create a society in which citizens are empowered to actively participate in the democratic process and contribute to positive change in their surroundings. This idea is supported by literature on civic adult education, which emphasises the role of adult education in fostering active citizenship and social justice (e.g. Biesta, 2011; Brookfield, 2020; Wildemeersch, 2017).

In this editorial, we delve into two important inquiries: (1) what role can and should adult education play in strengthening a democracy amidst crisis, and (2) how adult civic education can effectively address the challenges to democracy in the context of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine and of its aftermath.

*Starting with the first inquiry:* in today’s rapidly evolving societal landscape, democracies face various challenges that jeopardise their stability and functioning. Signs of these challenges include increasing polarisation, erosion of trust in institutions, the rise of populism, threats to freedom of expression, and the dissemination of misinformation through social media platforms. Doubts about the effectiveness of democracy have become widespread due to the public debate that took place in the media. This uncertainty weakened the belief in liberal democracy and opened up the possibility for alternative forms of democracy (Ingruber, 2022). Viktor Orbán seized the opportunity and used the public doubts about the effectiveness of democracy to establish a form of ‘illiberal democracy’ in Hungary (Wilkin, 2018), where the majority rules, but the rights of minorities are not protected; ‘illiberal democracies’ are also characterised by restrictions on civil liberties, media censorship, and limitations on the independence of the judiciary. Vladimir Putin in his turn speaks about ‘particularities’ of Russian democracy, describing it as ‘managed democracy’, which emphasises the aspects of control involved in its functioning and where the principles of authoritarian rule were more prevalent than those of a true democracy (Requate, 2022). Crouch (2020) launched a discussion about the end of democracy as a system using the term ‘post-democracy’. Civic education could play an

important role in clarifying the confusing terminologies in political discourse. It would also help to shift the perception of civic education from something abstract and distant to something directly connected to people's lives and interests.

There are different opinions, though, when it comes to how education can contribute to empowering citizens in a democratic society. Baptiste (2000), for example, emphasises the 'coercive restraint', while Biesta (2011) highlights the importance of developing critical thinking, deliberation skills, and a sense of social responsibility. Some researchers argue that knowledge in a democratic society can and should be used to empower learners' voices in local, national, and/or international affairs and give them more influence and support them in their search for transformation (e.g. Gaventa, 2004). On the other hand, others – most notably Galston (2001, 2002) – argue that civic education revolves around the development of individuals who possess the competence to navigate their lives effectively within their political community while also actively supporting it. Drawing on critical and materialist theories, the goal of civic education can be defined as overcoming all (unjustified) power relations (Brookfield, 2020). These theoretical perspectives emphasise the importance of addressing power structures and their impact on society in order to promote social justice and equality.

In short, civic education is usually directed towards both the preservation of the existing and the facilitation of the new, simultaneously encompassing affirmation and subversion (Barbehön & Wohnig, 2022). It becomes a central subject around which different forces engage and contend with one another. This dual nature of civic education reflects its dynamic and contested character, as it navigates between the tension of upholding established norms and structures while also seeking to challenge and transform them.

Additionally, it is also important to note that different social milieus have different connections to the political culture depending on the influences of their cultural backgrounds and social resources. This can create unequal opportunities for political representation – those with more socially privileged milieus being able to represent themselves more readily in the political arena, while others rely more on social networks and intermediary associations (Opheys & Bremer, 2022). Underprivileged milieus often face difficulties in articulating their concerns and modes of expression in the political arena and may feel unable to participate actively in political work – which is known in the literature as the 'civic empowerment gap' (Levinson, 2012). Civic adult education can play a crucial role in bridging this gap by providing individuals and groups with the necessary skills and knowledge to engage effectively in the political process and make their voices heard, regardless of their social background or resources.

Civic adult education serves as a platform where diverse perspectives, ideologies, and interests intersect and clash – with a strong commitment to pluralism. This contestation arises from the recognition that civic education has the *potential* to shape individuals' beliefs, values, and actions (and thus influences the broader social and political landscape), but also that the civic adult education has an ethical restraint and no right to mould and shape adult persons – following strong commitment to autonomy (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). It is important that civic adult education is often associated with democratic societies, as its main goal is to promote the ability and willingness to engage in politics by providing information and the foundation for informed judgements. However, in countries with limited democracy, civic education can take the form of patriotism classes, where hegemonic societies may utilise it to promote state ideology (Alava, 2020; Tolstenko et al., 2019). This possibility highlights the importance of critically examining the content and purpose of civic adult education in diverse contexts, ensuring that it goes beyond the narrow promotion of a specific ideology. Clearly, civic education is no longer limited solely to institutional educational settings in modern times, but instead requires active participation from the entire society. Comprehensive civic adult education calls for the involvement and contribution of individuals, groups, and organisations from various sectors of society. Citizen initiatives, non-profit organisations, and groups that advocate for democratic values can organise forums, workshops, and other events to raise

awareness of political and civic issues and provide an understanding of democratic processes. In this way, civic education becomes a central subject that different forces struggle over and engage with.

Democracy faces challenges and threats both from within and from without. In recent years, the global COVID-19 pandemic emerged as an internal threat, testing the resilience and legitimacy of democratic systems as governments implemented measures to curb the spread of the virus. These measures sparked debates and protests, raising questions about the balance between public health and individual rights, as well as the responsiveness and transparency of democratic governance (Opheys & Bremer, 2022). However, while grappling with internal challenges, democracy now confronts an external threat in the form of the Russian war against Ukraine. This external aggression poses a distinct set of challenges to the democratic principles and values that underpin international relations.

*Shifting our focus to the second inquiry*, we examine how adult civic education can effectively tackle the challenges to democracy in the context of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine and its aftermath. Within the domain of adult education, the quest for solutions to pressing societal issues and crises assumes a fundamental role. Within the concrete context of the Russian war against Ukraine, Morrice (2022), in an editorial published in this journal (vol. 41, issue 3), posed a crucial question just two months after the commencement of the Russian war against Ukraine: could the ongoing conflict in Ukraine serve as a transformative moment for refugee education in Europe? Moreover, we must also consider whether this war will prompt a broader re-evaluation and re-conceptualisation of civic adult education. The repercussions of this conflict may extend beyond the immediate refugee crisis, influencing our understanding and approaches to fostering informed and engaged citizenship on a larger scale. It seems credible that the Russian war against Ukraine has had profound implications for various aspects of society, including civic lifelong education. The consequences for civic adult education might be far-reaching, but at the moment difficult to predict. We will risk pointing to some possible questions that might arise in the research and practice of civic adult education in the context of war.

The war has exposed the vulnerabilities and challenges within civic education systems. It has revealed the potential for manipulation of information, propaganda, and the dangers of divisive narratives. This realisation calls for a re-evaluation of civic education curricula and methodologies to ensure they promote critical analysis, media literacy, and the ability to discern and challenge misinformation. As a result, there may be a growing demand for educational programs that promote civic awareness, human rights, conflict resolution, and intercultural understanding. While civic education traditionally emphasises peaceful and democratic solutions to social problems, the experience of war may prompt a shift in emphasis towards protecting democratic values, including the use of military force if necessary. In the aftermath of the conflict, it is likely that there will be renewed interest in searching for new concepts capable of defending democracy from external threats. It might give an impetus to revive the debate about the need of promoting a *'wehrhafte'* or *'streitbare Demokratie'* (both terms are used interchangeably) – a term coined in Germany that translates to 'defensive democracy' or 'vigilant democracy' (Barbehön & Wohnig, 2022; Widmaier, 2021). This concept highlights the importance of protecting democratic institutions and values from external and internal threats. The measures taken by the state to defend itself against enemies of democracy are often controversial. This is because a fundamental task of the state is to guarantee people's freedom, which includes freedom of speech, assembly, demonstration, and art. Everyone has the right to criticise democracy, and democracy must be able to withstand such criticism. However, parties or associations that actively work to abolish democracy must expect to be banned. This concept of a 'defensive democracy' or 'vigilant democracy' (*wehrhafte/streitbare Demokratie*) recognises the need to protect democracy from those who would use its own freedoms to undermine it (Scherb, 2022). The revitalisation of discussion around a *'wehrhafte Demokratie'* could lead to changes in the focus and content of civic lifelong education programs, with greater attention given to issues such as national security, civil defence, and the role of the military in society. While this shift may be necessary in the aftermath of a war, it is

important to ensure that such programs do not undermine the core principles of civic education, such as promoting critical thinking, active citizenship, and democratic values (Widmaier, 2021).

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the conflict, there will be a need for rebuilding and reconstruction efforts, which will require skilled and engaged citizens. Civic lifelong education can provide the tools and knowledge necessary for individuals to participate in these efforts and contribute to the rebuilding of their communities. In this regard, the challenges and consequences faced in developing civic education after the Russian war against Ukraine can be linked to the education efforts of the Allies in the aftermath of World War II, particularly in the context of the so-called 're-education' for Germans (Tent, 1982). After World War II, Germany was devastated both physically and morally. The Allies recognised the importance of rebuilding German society not only in terms of infrastructure but also in terms of values and democratic principles. As part of this process, they implemented extensive re-education programs aimed at fostering a democratic mindset and promoting civic engagement among the German population (Meilhammer, 2022). Alongside the example of Germany, other international cases demonstrate the impact of adult civic education in addressing historical divisions and promoting reconciliation. For instance, South Africa established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) after apartheid, incorporating civic education programs to engage adults in learning about the history of apartheid, human rights, and reconciliation (Christie, 2009). Likewise, Northern Ireland implemented Community-based Dialogue and Education (Lundy & McGovern, 2006), while Rwanda developed adult civic education programs in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide to address divisions and promote reconciliation (Russell, 2019). By exploring these experiences, we can gain valuable insights into the potential impact of civic education in addressing post-conflict challenges, fostering reconciliation, and strengthening democratic engagement. Several countries, whose population is under the influence of propaganda and state-controlled media, may require a comprehensive civic initiative to counter disinformation and promote democratic values. Similar to the post-World War II period, when re-education programs were implemented in Germany to challenge the influence of Nazi ideology, there is a pressing need for initiatives that aim to address the effects of propaganda and misinformation. By encouraging open dialogue, diverse perspectives, and access to reliable information, these programs can help individuals break free from the confines of state-controlled narratives and develop a more nuanced understanding of their society and the world.

In conclusion, this editorial underscored the critical importance of civic adult education in the face of contemporary challenges to democracy. It serves to caution against the narrowing of adult education solely to vocational or personal development purposes. The concern here lies in the limited interest shown towards citizenship-related topics and the lack of a clear vision for the kind of society adult educators aim to foster. It is vital for adult educators and educational institutions to adopt a broader perspective and embrace a comprehensive approach to education. This entails recognising and integrating the needs and challenges of the workforce while also promoting an understanding of civic responsibility, social justice, and ethical values. This editorial serves as a call to action for researchers, educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to prioritise and support research initiatives that enhance civic education and its transformative potential in the years to come.

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