

SECOND TREND REPORT

TRANSIT

Think Tank for Adult Learning

Releasing the Chained Giant

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Management summary

TRANSIT is an interdisciplinary think tank that aims to record and analyse the latest developments in training and adult education and to conceptualise new perspectives on the future of adult learning. This second trend report is based on the findings of previous TRANSIT events, on interviews with experts and on additional research from the literature.

A notable aspect of adult education and training is its strongly vocational focus, combined with a public discourse that categorises adult education and professional development as a literal survival strategy for the individual and society. Against this background, the qualities of adult cultural education¹ remain largely obscured, as do the potential contributions that the adult learning sector might make with regard to radical shifts such as climate change or an ageing society. TRANSIT is therefore proposing a new emphasis within adult learning whereby cultural education is re-evaluated and its potential is also discussed in the context of continuing vocational and professional development. In addition, TRANSIT argues that more room should be given to adult learning focused on processes of change, particularly since our response to radical change requires a form of education that helps to solve complex problems, whether at the individual, organisational, community, social or global level.

Similarly, digitisation has long been a persistent topic in the sphere of adult education. The prohibition of classroom teaching as a consequence of the Coronavirus pandemic has, however, given real impetus to the process of digitisation. That impetus is now highlighting the fact that the adult learning sector still needs to find an appropriate way of integrating digital technologies into its teaching and learning settings. Once the Coronavirus pandemic is over and the restrictions on classroom teaching have been lifted, a new balance will need to be found between the digital learning platforms and face-to-face teaching. This process should also include an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of different formats. The sector must also adjust to the fact that the requirements of learners as customers – along with their habits and expectations – will have changed during the pandemic. How long these changes will last will become clear over the coming months. It is unlikely that the impetus given to digitisation by the current crisis will pass by the adult learning sector altogether.

TRANSIT is calling for an open yet critical attitude to the adoption of digital technologies in adult education – critical, because adult learning will always, in its essence, also be a social process, a fact that has to be taken into account in the process of digital transformation.

¹ This report uses the term “cultural” in a broad sense that goes beyond merely aesthetic and ethical criteria.

1 Introduction

In Switzerland, adult education is a complex system that is influenced by various factors. While, on the one hand, adult learning is largely organised on a free-market basis, it is also subject to expectations that market-driven training alone is unlikely to fulfil; it is expected to play a key role in meeting the challenges of the present and future and is often propagated as the key to resolving all kinds of problems without, however, being given an explicit mandate to do so, for example by politicians.

At the same time, public discussions of adult learning are restricted largely to vocational and professional issues. These, in turn, are primarily focused on technical skills and issues of direct utility in the workplace. At the same time, there appears – or so you might believe from opinions expressed in the business world – to be an increasing demand for transversal skills. Competencies such as critical and creative thinking, flexibility and the ability to solve complex problems are therefore gaining importance.

These issues are being considered by the adult learning sector and its representatives. Nonetheless, thus far in Switzerland there has been no clear forum in which the contradictions inherent in the current situation might be discussed and common approaches developed.

TRANSIT, the think tank launched by SVEB in 2017, aims to provide such a forum. It offers space for thought and creativity and therefore provides an opportunity to develop perspectives on adult learning within the context of an open network. These perspectives are in no way instructions for specific course designs. Rather, they indicate potential areas for development (such as the upheavals in the adult education market due to digitisation) and possible ways of responding to them. Over the next few years, such perspectives might lead to concrete projects being developed as part of the TRANSIT initiative.

1.1 WHAT IS TRANSIT?

The TRANSIT think tank is an interdisciplinary platform. It develops analyses, theories and scenarios related to the role of adult education in society.

Thematically, the focus is on longer-term social developments that are or could become relevant to lifelong learning. The think tank's findings are intended to provide organisations and experts in the field of adult learning with ideas and inspiration for their own ongoing development.

What distinguishes TRANSIT from other think tanks is its collaborative approach. While TRANSIT – like other think tanks – bases its work on expertise and academic analyses, the themes, scenarios and

perspectives it covers are not developed by a closed circle of experts but in participatory forums that are open to any interested party. As a result, a wide variety of perspectives and many aspects of practice-based knowledge are incorporated into the trend analyses it undertakes. This process requires a good deal of time and a willingness to continuously reflect on processes and content and to adapt them where necessary. It also requires open platforms where topics and experiences can be discussed and concepts for the future of education can be tested.

The think tank was launched at the initiative of the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning in 2017. It is financially supported by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI).

The name TRANSIT symbolises the idea behind the think tank: on one hand, adult learning is in a state of flux, and on the other, we are living through a general situation of shifting boundaries, whether in terms of the boundaries between our private and professional lives or the boundaries between work, learning and leisure, to name just two examples.

1.2 REVIEW OF THE PAST TWO YEARS

The think tank began its work in September 2017. An initial meeting of individuals from different disciplines was arranged to kick the project off. It served as a means of starting to determine what themes were relevant to the think tank's work. The experts were invited to consider the question of how knowledge might develop in the future and what this might mean for education. The thematic framework was left deliberately broad and open. The purpose of the meeting was to identify starting points for an interdisciplinary discussion on the future of adult learning and to capture some initial thoughts on emerging trends. Despite the participants' very different fields of expertise, ranging from literature and machine learning to education for sustainable development, the group soon identified topics that they all considered relevant for the future of education.

At a second meeting involving experts from other specialist areas in August 2018, specific themes were outlined more clearly. These topics were then discussed in greater depth at a larger-scale public event in January 2019 in Zurich. While this was open to any interested party, it was aimed primarily at professionals in the adult education sector. The topics under discussion included creativity, spaces for learning and having experiences, and multiple knowledge sources. The results of this meeting were presented in detail in the think tank's first trend report.²

A fourth topic – “dispositives of power” - remained on the think tank's radar as an important topic for the future of adult learning. It was discussed separately at an international workshop on 21 May 2019 and at a larger public event on 22 November 2019 in Zurich.

² The first TRANSIT Trend Report is available at www.thinktank-transit.ch

Building on the concept of the “dispositives” or apparatuses of power proposed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, the conference enabled participants to reflect on the behaviours and discourses of different actors in adult education, and the ways in which they see themselves and their role. Inspired by Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, participants were encouraged to experiment with thinking of the real-life sites of education and training as “places outside of all places” and “counter-sites”. The event was designed to increase the participants’ awareness of the realms of possibility – not in some far-off utopia, but within the day-to-day practices of the sector (see p. 8).

TRANSIT is not only active in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. A meeting was also held in French-speaking Lausanne on 17 September 2019 to discuss issues of pedagogical innovation, the political dimension and the impact of structural and economic conditions on adult education. In Italian-speaking Ticino, meanwhile, the think tank and the scenarios devised thus far were outlined at a conference for instructors on 19 November 2019 in Bellinzona. Representatives from the French and Italian-speaking regions of Switzerland also participated in the public events held in Zurich. As well as these events, several smaller activities took place, including two “TRANSIT Salons”. There, the topics from the larger events were discussed in greater depth in a more informal setting.

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1.3. PUBLICATIONS

In parallel with the events mentioned above, the think tank’s website www.thinktank-transit.ch was set up. This serves as an online space for considered reflection upon the topics discussed at the events, mainly in the form of interdisciplinary expert interviews. The website also serves as an archive of the think tank’s work.

In addition, the journal “Education Permanente” devoted its June 2019 edition to the future of adult education. It took forward the concept used on the TRANSIT website, examining the topics involved more deeply with the aid of expert interviews. The journal made TRANSIT’s work accessible to a wider interest group while also introducing it to the community of educators in the adult learning field who are interested in more in-depth reflection on topics related to adult education.

1.4 OVERALL OUTCOMES FROM THE EVENTS AND BASIS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSPECTIVES

The work carried out at the various events, workshops and open discussion sessions has repeatedly given voice to one concept: that, in the given circumstances – in terms of the market, policy frameworks, organisational structures in the sector, and so on – adult education appears only partly able to fulfil its potential. It is, one

might say, a chained giant whose true scope and significance often go unrecognised.

The perspectives described here are therefore an attempt to release these restraints and to give the adult learning sector more freedom to move. Especially against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, a greater degree of freedom – and perhaps more willingness to experiment – are called for. After all, the crisis has revealed the vulnerability of the education and training sector and many of its actors in economic terms, and how little space and few resources they have previously devoted to tackling important future issues such as digitisation. At the same time, the pandemic is also making it clear how strongly societies depend on the ability of their populations to learn.

Furthermore, as an open forum free of political and economic constraints, TRANSIT also wants to act as a³ heterotopia: a place where professionals from the education and training sector think about what they are doing, where they want to go, and the role they want to play with regard to social challenges.

³ We use the term coined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Heterotopias, according to Foucault, are “real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites [...] within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.” (Foucault 2013)

2 Perspectives

2.1. DIVING INTO DIGITISATION

Digitisation has led to disruptive changes in a number of sectors. In Switzerland, however, the adult education sector has so far appeared to be largely unaffected by such fundamental shifts. Indeed, while until recently the adult education sector has become more aware of digitisation, it has tended to adopt a wait-and-see policy.⁴ With regard to the adult learning market, however, this lack of concern is surprising if we consider the new competitive situation created by digitisation. To begin with, video tutorials can be found on platforms such as YouTube on almost every conceivable topic. Furthermore, since 2011, several MOOC (massive open online course) platforms have sprung up, offering an increasing number of courses to an increasing number of students. Although, it has to be admitted, MOOCs are criticised for the fact that only a fraction of those registering for courses complete them, they represent serious competition for traditional training providers. This is all the more the case now that the platform operators' focus is shifting from their original target group of university students to the so-called "lifelong career learner" community (Schenkel 2019, p. 69). In addition, traditional training providers are increasingly in competition with social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Xing. LinkedIn, in particular, is pursuing an aggressive strategy of promoting its adult education programme. As well as private individuals, LinkedIn is focusing especially heavily on business customers. Anke Grotlüschen, one of the few researchers looking in depth at digital transformation in adult learning, has concluded that the arrival of online providers – with their new business models and marketing strategies – could potentially bring substantial disruption to the education and training sector.

Even so, it is difficult to predict just how much the training and education market will be subject to disruption. Anke Grotlüschen, one of the few researchers looking in depth at digital transformation in adult learning, has concluded that the arrival of online providers – with their new business models and marketing strategies – could potentially bring substantial disruption to the education and training sector. Based on her assessment of the situation, these new players will represent significant competition and possibly a serious economic threat for commercial training providers in particular (see Grotlüschen 2018). This prognosis is given further weight by an analysis of the parallels between the adult education and media sectors (see Schenkel 2019). Other market observers are of the view that the vocational education and training sector will be the field most strongly affected.⁵ A number of traditional providers are

4 A 2017 survey on digitisation in adult education conducted by the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB) and the Zurich University of Teacher Education (PH Zurich) found that 90% of providers continue to see their institution's focus as lying on classroom teaching, with an approximately 50% split between those reliant on "technology-free classroom teaching" and those using "digitally assisted classroom teaching". A majority of the providers surveyed mentioned a need to catch up with their students' digital skills. (see Sgier, Haberzeth, Schüepp 2018)

5 A similar sentiment was expressed by Michael Achermann, Head of the Institute for Vocational Education and Training (IBAW) at the Migros Club School, Switzerland's largest adult education institution, in Lucerne. At the third national quality meeting in 2019, he commented: <https://alice.ch/de/informiert-bleiben/>

“It seems that we have already passed the peak of the digitalisation phase. The digital technologies are now omnipresent, and they have fundamentally altered the circumstances under which we live and work. I would describe these new circumstances as a digital condition.”

Felix Stalder in an interview with TRANSIT (www.thinktank-transit.ch)

endeavouring to anticipate this process by reconfiguring their organisational structures and by means of new service offerings.

The coronavirus pandemic, which resulted in a complete ban on face-to-face teaching between March and June 2020, has radically altered the situation facing training providers in the short term and triggered a veritable boom in digitisation. In order to protect at least some of their revenues, providers have considerably expanded their online offerings or even developed such services for the first time. Right now, it is impossible to determine how much of this involuntary growth in digitisation will persist after the pandemic and be integrated into providers' regular operations. What does seem likely, however, is that there will be a “new normal” for many providers once the crisis has passed.

While it may sound cynical, the Covid-19 pandemic might well be a blessing in disguise for some providers, in terms of the greater digitisation expected in the adult education sector and the entry of new players. Many operators have been forced to deal with digital forms of provision. Once developed, such services could well continue to be offered, at least in part, when the restrictions on classroom teaching have been lifted. Such an approach could meet the needs of people who have learned to appreciate the potential of online courses during this period of enforced absence from the classroom – people who will increasingly be looking for such digital offerings in the future. However, the opposite outcome is also possible: that students

will appreciate the value of social interaction and personal encounters in face-to-face settings even more after the experience of listening in a largely passive way to webinars and completing online homework within their own homes.

Seen from the perspective of adult education, learning is a fundamentally social and interactive process that is based on the learner engaging with various types of content and with differing perspectives. This definition of learning means that most adult education providers see classroom-based teaching as a key facet of their work. Whether this understanding of learning will survive the process of digital transformation remains to be seen. Certain target audiences might find it highly tempting to obtain a certificate – one that might well be free of charge and internationally transferable – by purely digital means and without too much personal commitment.

Providers therefore face a significant challenge. Given the advancement of the digital economy and the push for digitisation in adult education, a retreat to technology-free teaching is risky. On the other hand, moving to solely digital provision could mean losing students who see social interaction and a personal teacher-student relationship as important. For the majority of providers, blended learning opportunities are likely to be in increasing demand in the future. Providers might therefore face heightened expectations on the part of students. While simply moving from classroom teaching to a Zoom environment was sufficient during the Covid-19 pandem-

ic, in future there will be a demand for services involving well-considered methodological and didactic settings that enable personal encounters while also saving on unnecessary travel and providing a degree of spatial and temporal flexibility. Students are also increasingly likely to expect learning resources to be freely available online, or entire courses to be offered free of charge – as is the case with providers from the digital sector, with their quite different view of learning and business models, which have little if anything to do with education.

Providers that are aware of their particular strengths, consider the advantages and disadvantages of the various learning settings and have the courage to experiment with new technological possibilities can discover interesting perspectives in the process of digitisation. The adult education sector might well benefit from closer cooperation between educators and technology developers. Regarding cooperation with tech companies, we would recommend keeping a critical eye on the involvement of the digital sector in adult education and asking what interests lie behind its involvement and whether these can be reconciled with the aims of the educational institutions concerned.

Potential risks

One risk of diving too quickly into digital transformation is that, without sound didactic concepts, digitised offerings might fail to achieve their goals (on the role of didactic concepts in the digitisation of adult education, see Claudia Bremer 2019). In responding to the coronavirus emergency, digitisation has not taken place where it makes sense in terms of content and the learning process, but rather where providers have seen an opportunity to limit the economic damage caused by the restrictions on classroom teaching. If this strategy is pursued without reflection after the crisis, what is intended to be a straightforward process of digitisation might well end up leading into a blind alley.

Another major challenge involves the handling of data. When digital technologies are used, it is inevitable that students' personal data will be collected. In future, providers' success may also depend on the way in which they deal with this data.

Finally, there are also risks to consider when dealing with learning resources. The increasing dissemination of open educational resources is providing educators with a large pool of freely available materials. However, they themselves are also coming under pressure to make their materials available free of charge – materials in which they have invested a lot of time and money. This could lead to a devaluation of the services they provide, services that are integral to the business model used by self-employed educators in particular.

2.2 COUNTERING THE “ROBOTISATION” OF THE HUMAN

When discussing adult learning in Switzerland, as in many other European countries, the concept refers, with few exceptions, to adult vocational and professional development. This is also meant in discussions on adult education’s role in responding to problems such as digitisation, skill shortages and demographic change. The question arises, however, as to what future the sector in its current form is actually preparing working people for in Switzerland. In other words, can the adult learning sector realistically meet the expectations placed in it?

According to a business survey conducted by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2015, the ability to solve complex problems⁶ was seen as one of the most important skills in the labour market at the time. The organisations surveyed predicted that this competency would remain at the top of the labour market’s list of most sought-after skills in 2020, followed closely by critical thinking and creativity. Compared to their assessment for 2015, organisations expected creativity in particular to become much more important by 2020, even though it was ranked as only the tenth most important skill back then. This prognosis was explained as follows: “Creativity will become one of the top three skills workers will need. With the avalanche of new products, new technologies and new ways of working, workers are going to have to become more creative in order to benefit from these changes” (ibid.). A similar trend was expected with regard to emotional intelligence: “Emotional intelligence, which doesn’t feature in the top 10 today, will become one of the top skills needed by all.”⁷

Technical and physical skills, on the other hand, were expected to be seen as less valuable. Similar trends are also predicted by other studies from the business arena, such as a Deloitte survey from 2017 (Deloitte 2017, p. 11) and the most recent projections published by LinkedIn. According to that platform, the five most sought-after competencies in 2020 are⁸ creativity, persuasion, teamwork, adaptability and emotional intelligence. At present, however, we are not aware of any academic studies confirming these predictions.

It would be short-sighted to assume that the shift in the weighting of skills will only take place in professions involving a high level of qualifications. Even in roles in which digitisation promotes routine and limits the variety of tasks performed, it is likely that feeling and intention, creativity, flexibility and improvisation will all remain key elements of human labour and may even gain in importance. Susanne Umbach, Hanna Böving and Erik Haberzeth refer to this in their study “Kompetenz 4.0”.⁹

6 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-10-skills-you-need-to-thrive-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/>

7 ibid.

8 <https://learning.linkedin.com/blog/top-skills/the-skills-companies-need-most-in-2020and-how-to-learn-them>

9 The “Skills 4.0” study examines the relationship between digitisation, changes in the labour market, workforce skills and adult education. It will be completed in 2020. At the #Weiterbildung.digital conference organised by PH Zurich and SVEB on 25 January 2018, some preliminary results were presented. (Böving, Haberzeth, Umbach 2018)

“Demonstrating and promoting the potential of human initiative and generally helping to organise work in manner conducive to personal development are important tasks that could be undertaken by the adult education sector in future, at a time when workplaces and jobs are being digitised.”

Hanna Böving, Erik Haberzeth, Susanne Umbach (2018)

Nevertheless, the majority of offerings, especially looking at courses delivered on digital platforms, are less focused on the transfer of transversal competencies or of those elements representing human skills that cannot be delegated to machines. Instead, their focus is on highly technical training courses of a strongly functional nature or, in connection to digitisation, on the concrete application of tools.

Observers of the sector also note that vocational and professional development programmes and content with a clear connection to the functional roles involved have been expanded, refined and categorised in recent years. Walter Schöni, who considers this development against the background of concepts for adding educational value, concludes: “For almost every connected set of tasks and every level of qualification identified with regard to vocational and professional roles, new curricula and qualification procedures are being developed if there are indications of demand for them – even if these are most likely to be called into question the next time things change.” (Schöni 2017, p. 56)

This “compartmentalisation” of the skills imparted and their strongly technical focus thus reduces the durability of their value in a rapidly changing world. When promoting such offerings, providers always operate with the promise of people getting a certain job in a certain industry. What they fail to mention is that, as a result of rapidly advancing technological developments, the skills learned could, in the foreseeable future, be associated with either job losses or the need for further training.

A continuous process of “updating” one’s skills is therefore a logical – and perhaps desirable – consequence of this trend in the programmes available. In some ways, the human thereby becomes a

kind of operating system, or robot. Erich Fromm remarked as early as 1968: “The ability to build robots which are like men belongs, if anywhere, to the future. But the present already shows us men who act like robots. When the majority of men are like robots, then indeed there will be no problem in building robots which are like men.” (Fromm 1968)

This looming robotisation of humankind should be counteracted by educational offerings that are tailored to improving working skills which are specific to human beings – especially, in fact, for employees in professions involving a high degree of digitisation and an apparently high level of routine. This opens up new areas for adult education; areas that can also be combined with the honing of basic skills.

Potential risks

Convincing employers of the benefits of such adult education offerings will be an uphill task. It would therefore be helpful to outline the advantages of these particular benefits using best-practice examples. The close involvement of industry associations would also be necessary.

2.3 CULTURAL EDUCATION IN PLACE OF SELF-OPTIMISATION

Adult learning always takes place in the context of public discourse. In Switzerland, anyone is welcome to take part in adult education if they so desire – but the public discourse focuses less on individual responsibility and more on adult education as a necessity. Since the turn of the millennium if not earlier, lifelong learning has been postulated as a virtual survival strategy in the labour market. In

other words, those who want to survive in the labour market at a time of rapid social, technological and economic change have to gain new skills, and on a continuous basis (Šimenc, Kodelja 2016).

What this implies is that, from a legal point of view, acquiring new skills is the individual's free choice. At the same time, however, that individual has a responsibility to do so, not only for their own sake but also to maintain the competitiveness of the economic system. This puts people under a great deal of pressure, ultimately transforming responsibility into a moral duty. Gaining new skills becomes a make-or-break question (Šimenc, Kodelja 2016).

This discourse addresses a very specific type of worker and learner: the focus is on the individual entrepreneur (see also Bröckling 2007). He or she is assumed to accept the principles of neoliberalism – of entrepreneurship and competition – as fundamentally positive and to view learning in this context (Ball 2009). Learning thus means the self-optimisation of an individual in competition with others. At the same time, by learning, that individual increases the competitiveness of the company for which they work, and of the country in which they live.

The adult learning sector has, however, something to offer which could balance out this drive for self-optimisation and the associated narrow, instrumental view of learning. Specifically, we are talking about cultural education for adults, which is based on a different understanding of learning. According to the manifesto of the Association of Swiss Adult Education Centres, this involves education for the sake of reason: education of the person, instead of training for the

“So far, business and education have cultivated a certain one-sidedness, rational thinking has been promoted much more than emotional, artistic or playful approaches to knowledge and action. However, the problems are becoming more and more complex, and the realization is gradually gaining ground that without creativity rational thinking is not able to solve these problems.”

Paolo Bianchi in an interview with TRANSIT (www.thinktank-transit.ch)

sake of utility.¹⁰ Adult cultural education based on a humanistic, Enlightenment-derived tradition can enable people to reflect on prevailing conditions. Such education considers the human being as a whole, with that person’s individual biography, specific position in diverse contexts of life, and involvement in political and social conditions. This understanding of education is rooted, as Peter Faulstich (2011) outlines, in enlightenment, understood as an “endeavour to shed light on customary and entrenched practices that have not been questioned” (ibid., p. 11). This involves not just a critique, but also a growth of empowerment and agency in the sense of greater self-determination. This type of education should be understood “as a never-ending process of discovering new potential in existing structures” (ibid., p. 11). Such a view of education helps to expand the scope for thought and action in adult education, whether vocational/professional or general. If this succeeds, the sector’s ability to enable “expansive learning” (Faulstich & Ludwig 2004) will increase, alongside the defensive single-loop learning that is generally expected. The conditions for this are more likely to be found in the context of adult cultural education than in continuing vocational and professional development settings. Unlike the majority of vocational, professional and labour-market-oriented training, cultural education for adults is not, or at least not primarily, subject to the dictates of competitiveness and self-optimisation. If it realises its critical, reflective and expansive potential, it could represent a more future-proof approach for the overall adult learning sector than obsessively attempting to constantly optimise oneself for requirements that might be obsolete in the near future.

¹⁰ <https://www.up-vhs.ch/de/2019/05/manifest/>

While calling for a corresponding change of perspective in education policy is legitimate, as the Association of Swiss Adult Education Centers did in its 2019 manifesto, policy alone will not bring about the shift required. The adult learning sector itself bears part of the responsibility for reprioritising its cultural activities and emphasising their value for individuals and society. The need for this is increasingly evident at an international level. Thus, for example, a broad-based North European network¹¹ is advocating a return to the German, Enlightenment-derived concept of education as a basis for advancing adult learning across Europe.

The time is perhaps ripe for a shift in our understanding of education. After all, a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences are a perfect demonstration of the fact that little is to be gained from considerations of mere utility. Rather, men and women's ability to (self-)reflect, think critically, draw historical parallels and – last but not least – discover their own creativity, are becoming vital factors for survival.

Potential risks

A change of perspective in the adult learning sector can only be achieved if adult cultural education is bold enough to interrogate and challenge established adult education practices that are geared to immediate short-term benefit for the labour market. Over the last few years, however, the sector has instead tended to turn in on itself.

Now that the coronavirus pandemic has perfectly illustrated the

¹¹ <https://nordicbildung.org/>

“The point is: If you have to cope with complex problems, new skills, as for instance technical competencies, are not sufficient on their own. You need a deeper understanding of the situation, the broader context and the processes or mechanisms which shape these problems.”

Jyri Manninen in an interview with TRANSIT (www.thinktank-transit.ch)

systemic failure of the global economy and the neoliberal order, it is perhaps the ideal time for a change in perspective. Anyone looking for answers right now is unlikely to find them in management or programming courses.

2.4 ADULT EDUCATION AS A SEISMOGRAPH OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTS

Major social upheavals are always connected to learning processes. Accordingly, we might expect the adult education and training sector to speak out on developments such as climate change or – as we are experiencing right now – a global pandemic that requires major behavioural changes. While the adult learning sector is indeed making its voice heard to some extent, it is not seen as one of the parties claiming to contribute substantial knowledge to the tackling of social crises. This, at least, applies to the majority of adult education providers. Those who are active in this way tend to be actors working in niche areas or engaging with adult learning from an analytical, strategic or academic perspective.

With its strong market orientation and focus on the labour market, it is not easy for the adult education sector to see itself as an actor that can help shape and critically scrutinise social developments. It can, nonetheless, function as a seismograph by detecting problems before they feature in public discourse and in other areas of education. Here, the very diversity and much-criticised complexity of the adult education sector can add value: unlike the highly structured and state-controlled formal education system, it is subject to few

constraints from cumbersome curricula and government regulations. This gives it plenty of freedom to pick up on new topics, challenge existing arrangements, and perhaps even change the rules of the game or at least experiment with alternatives.

Will it actually do this, however? The pressure to compete in a private education market despite mostly having little or no public funding – as well as their fixation on qualifications that can be exploited in the labour market – limits the room for manoeuvre that non-formal education providers might theoretically enjoy.

Despite these challenging circumstances, there are opportunities to conceptualise adult education as a socially effective and even transformative force – if not in the mainstream then at least in niche areas. A good example of this is seen in transformative, change-oriented adult education. While this approach flourishes more on the margins of the sector, it has a long tradition and firmly promotes an attitude of not being content with traditional single-loop learning. The idea behind it is that of designing adult education in such a way as to help solve complex problems at the individual, organisational, community, social or global level. To achieve this, learning processes need to go deeper than simply dealing with the acquisition of information or training up on specific skills. This should be achieved by means of appropriate methods, which essentially involve students reflecting on their own ways of thinking and experiences in a common learning process and understanding the context or system in which they operate. Instead of elitist discussions, the complex connections involved should be grasped in a fully grounded way, on the basis of the learners' specific experience.

The precursors of this approach can be found, for example, in the work of Paulo Freire and of Augusto Boal with his “Theatre of the Oppressed”. According to Jyri Manninen, who has researched into transformative adult learning for 30 years, Socrates is also, to a certain extent, a progenitor of this type of adult education, with his tireless series of questions. Similarly, questions and dialogue lie at the heart of many of the methods used in this form of education. Change-oriented adult learning represents a critical, emancipatory approach that does not, however, follow a particular ideology. Nonetheless, this does not mean that it is immune to ideologies. From an historical perspective, however, adult learning is a child of the Enlightenment (cf. Faulstich) and has the fundamental objective of promoting the empowerment of the individual.

At a number of events organised by TRANSIT, a certain unease has been expressed (with differing levels of openness) about the fact that adult education is now seen by society, business and politicians as something that can be useful in solving the problems of the day, such as inclusion, skill shortages and digitisation. While this is gratifying and indicates an appreciation of the sector, at the same time it gives rise to suspicion. In other words, what kind of role is this? And to whose values and interests is the adult education sector

committing itself? One example is the promotion of basic skills. While these are necessary for survival in the labour market, does this form of education actually meet the individual's needs? Will it help to increase the person's degree of agency and open up new opportunities to them? Or does it primarily serve to aid the business in tailoring its low-skilled employees to fit into its operational machinery? Against the background of these ambivalences and contradictions, a number of discussions are taking place on the future of adult education. At TRANSIT, for example, these discussions have generated the idea of creating a "slow learning" label, mirroring the "slow food" movement. This represents a radically conceived form of learning that sets aside all predefined learning objectives and any focus on skills, certificates, and assignments of roles to make room for a quality of in-depth learning that goes beyond considerations of efficiency.

Transformative learning represents an ambitious approach. It could offer a means of defining society's major challenges as tasks which education can help deal with, and tackling them proactively. One major example would be climate change. Issues of this magnitude and complexity are unlikely to be solved without far-reaching learning processes. The adult education sector knows a lot about how adults learn and what it takes to initiate lasting, individual change processes. It is time to give detailed consideration, in practice and in research, to the ways in which adult education might contribute to social change. Finally, on this basis, the adult learning sector might give its own definition of its place and role in society, might engage more actively in public debates and, at the same time, distance itself from unrealistic expectations.

Potential risks

Just as societies are not individuals, the insights and methods drawn from individual learning processes cannot be transferred one-to-one to entire societies. In order to avoid rash decisions, unrealistic expectations and naive over-estimations of the sector's influence, attention should always be paid to what kind of change is being sought and at what level, including in the case of change-oriented or transformative adult education. When it comes to issues such as climate change, an interdisciplinary approach is indispensable, if only because of the enormously complex issues involved.

3 Conclusion

Adult education in Switzerland faces a variety of challenges. It is not just desirable that we take these on board, but inevitable. The challenges involved relate to both the circumstances surrounding adult education and the functions it performs for society in a broad sense. It can no longer be reductively assigned the role of an optimisation programme for business; that role does not align either with the adult learning sector's inherent potential or its self-image.

Processes of change, whether triggered by climate change, political instability or demographic change, are threatening to shake the foundations of our social system – in terms of both our economic framework and our conception of democracy. The adult education sector should respond by opening up areas for reflection in which critical questions can be asked and innovative solutions can be found.

The TRANSIT think tank aims to support this process by serving as a platform for critically examining the present and future of adult learning. At TRANSIT's events, we have drawn inspiration, among other sources, from the French philosopher Michel Foucault (see Klingovsky 2009). His concept of heterotopias has served as an inspiration for us in designing TRANSIT as a space for experimentation or, in Foucault's terms, a "reservoir of imagination" as to how adult education might develop over the next few years. The perspectives presented here have been developed on the basis of TRANSIT's events and from our discussions with experts from different fields of expertise. We would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for your contributions.

TRANSIT continues to invite all interested parties to get involved and critically discuss the perspectives outlined here.

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