Title: What can we learn from art practices? Exploring new perspectives for critically engaging with plurality and difference in adult education.

Abstract

In recent years I have studied various practices of art education both with youth and adults in schools and community organizations. I have also been engaged in a North-South dialogue with a colleague from South-Africa about the emancipatory potential of popular art education practices. These commitments have made me explore how critical reflection could be reconsidered and related anew to practices of adult education. An important source of inspiration has been the French philosopher Jacques Rancière who, in his philosophical work, criticizes the way educators, artists and politicians often ‘stultify’ the people they want to inform, sensitize or politicize. He observes that in many of these practices inequality is presupposed, since the participants - be they students or entire audiences - are assumed to lack insight, awareness or consciousness. As an alternative, he suggests to start from the recognition of equality as a point of departure, rather than as an outcome of an educational or artistic process. In that view, equality means that all people have a baseline capacity to make sense of their world and their experiences, since they are all capable to ‘translate signs into signs’.

When this assumption is taken as a point of departure in various domains of education, it clears the way for practices other than the ones we are used to. It means that educators are not necessarily the experts or the master explicators, but in the first place persons that appeal to and stimulate the will of the learners to make use of their own intelligence. This kind of framing the educational relationship is of course not alien to practices of adult education. However, often, in spite of the dialogical rhetoric, even in critical adult education these stultification effects are not uncommon, particularly when notions of ‘false consciousness’ inspire the teaching practices.

In my observations of several cases of art education, I saw this principle of equality of intelligence at work. This convinced me that this alternative way of framing the educational relationship has potential, also with regard to adult education practices that deal with politically sensitive issues such as migration, difference, nationalism, inequality, etc.. All of us have experienced in many contexts and at diverse occasions that attempts to ‘convince’ people with rational arguments that xenophobic or racist utterances are morally and intellectually wrong and even dangerous for the well-being of democratic societies, have clear limitations and often produce the opposite effects. Therefore it is worth exploring how some artists nowadays try to deal with these limitations and investigate other ways to make public such sensitive issues. An inspiring figure in this respect is the Belgian-Mexican artist Francis Alys, whom I came across at an exhibition a few years ago where he demonstrated an original way to explore and articulate the ambivalences and paradoxes of issues such as asylum seeking, ethnic and political conflicts, illegal border crossing, etc.. He thereby traverses the borders between poetry and politics in both directions. In his works of art, that at first sight often have an enigmatic character, he combines various techniques such as painting, video, drawing and photography to create installations and performances that invite the audience to consider the ambivalences of the way we normally look at reality and to explore alternative perspectives. He does so, I would say in a Rancièrean way, without trying to convince or enlighten from the superior
position of the master explicator, but with the intention to surprise the viewers and, in doing so, to consider other ways to publicly deal with matters of concern. In some of works of art, such as ‘When faith moves mountains’ or ‘Don’t cross the bridge before you get to the river’ he also invites whole communities to help him to construct the installation or performance which, in my view, is also a sort of expression of the assumption of equality in his approach.

In my paper, I want to explore further the contribution of artists such as Francis Alys to new ways of articulating matters of public concern and to raise the question to what extent such approaches can be inspiring for practices of adult education that struggle with the stereotypes and prejudices of their participants, particularly with regard to the present-day challenges of multicultural societies. I also want to look at the work of such artists through the lens of Jacques Rancière’s philosophy. I think that this investigation will also inspire me and some colleague researchers from South-Africa when we will engage next year in a research project on emancipation through popular art education in the Cape province.