

# Learning from the Past for the Future: How to Make Adult Education Sustainable

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## Abstract

When compared to education with children, adolescents and students, adult education has particular opportunities and challenges, depending on stronger biographical influences: adults have developed their own learning style and learning competence and apart from more formal learning opportunities facilitated through digital learning and/ or learning in schools/ universities, there are many opportunities for informal learning, often influenced by experiences of education as a child. In this regard, biographical learning offers opportunities for transformational, organic, remembrance and experiences. The study, therefore, focuses on such kinds of adult education as a core element, particularly of Protestant adult education.

This paper presents a multidimensional concept of Protestant adult education, which integrates existing concepts into a memory oriented educational framework. Therefore, the theoretical considerations explain the phenomenological background of this particular concept. In a second step, this concept will be contextualized within the historical context of Protestant adult education. The summary emphasizes the particular aspect of educational coping with past, current and future experiences and situations.

*Keywords:* education, learning, memory, narration, stereotypes, transformation.

## Introduction

Adult education – particularly Protestant adult education – can be compared with a human organism with two feet and legs, hands and arms, with a trunk and a head. The particular challenge hereby is to achieve balance; this concept is a core condition for sustainability, because it facilitates resilience and development (Franzenburg, 2016a). Protestant adult education balances:

- between the Reformation and Pietist tradition on one side (foot), and the tradition of enlightenment and modernity on the other (foot),
- between church or faith orientation (internal influence) as one “hand”, and orientation to social challenges (external influence) as the other “hand”,
- between alternative points of view and influences, having to integrate them like digestion or breathing by taking and providing.
- between holistic and analytical skills like the right and the left brain, and thus to coordinate different experiences and purposes.

In a similar way, preparing, organizing, facilitating, and evaluating adult learning courses means such balancing. Crucial, therefore, is not only encouraging the aspects of teaching and training skills, of the aesthetic, social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and other aspects of education, but also nurturing the soul and recognizing and acknowledging the inherent spiritual capacities (Dirkx, 1997; English and Gillen (2000) through a kind of “emancipatory spirituality” (Lerner, 2000) within the framework of religious pluralism and regard for the particular stage of faith (Fowler, 1991). Because of the diversity of adult education concepts, different places for adult education are crucial. Thus, lifelong learning becomes possible by using a variety of training places (school, university, adult education centers, academies, training on the job and in parishes); such diversity also facilitates a remembrance oriented learning, particularly concerning the Shoa (Adorno, 1997; Boschki et. al., 2010), e.g. by excursions, and offers wellness and soul care oriented education by providing a spiritual atmosphere, and also intercultural dialogue through an appropriate neutral environment. Concerning Protestant adult education, the particular theological concept is also worth considering: There are differences in educational concepts depending on the basic decision, whether people are acknowledged as images of God (focus on individual person) or clients in a market place (focus on group membership), whether Christian contents and secular contexts are related as two regiments of God (Luther; focus on autonomous learning), or kingship of God (Calvin; focus on rule oriented learning), whether creation (focus on global aspects) or the current life-world (focus on regional aspects) is the context of learning.

These observations underline that Protestant adult education has to balance between the poles of Church and society by religious contributions to social discussions and general education (DEAE, 1978), or by mutual sharing and considering experiences in the light of the faith/belief and of current challenges as the core tasks of a learning and teaching church (EKD, 1983).

Because it belongs to different areas, church and state (DEAE, 1978), Protestant adult education facilitates autonomous and life world oriented learning via systemic thinking, circular questions, holistic work, and networking (Jütte & Schilling, 2005). Thus, education becomes an individual and emotional search movement (Arnold & Holzapfel, 2008), focused on the intentions of the learning subject (Arnold 1996; Arnold & Holzapfel, 2008; Egger, 2008; Faulstich & Ludwig, 2004; Holzkamp, 1996; Ludwig 2000) during the interaction process between individual and collective structures (Dausien, 2008; Egger, 2008; Felden, 2008), which makes the learning person a “sociopoietic system” (Alheit, 1997) with the awareness of self-efficacy (Mikula 2009). Therefore, economically influenced education needs motivating cultural value and history oriented education and remembrance learning in addition (EKD, 1997). By assisting individuals and groups coping with particular challenges, it facilitates autonomous global understanding and solidarity and spiritual growth (Ebbrecht, 1992). Evaluating the remembrance texts concerning Protestant adult education 1971, 1981, 1986 (Seiverth, 2011), the continuing purpose of facilitating better understanding of social challenges by considering biblical texts, particularly from the Gospel, to develop new life styles, changing perspectives, and the integration into general adult education (DEAE, 1978) through acknowledging the particular learning and life-styles of the participants, and the particular context in profession, family and church (Hungs, 1976). This complexity and ambivalence of Protestant adult education is also a part of sustainability, because it facilitates changes of perspective and, thus, a longitudinal process of consideration and discourse.

### Sustainable Adult Education in History

As a kind of organism, (Protestant and other) adult education shows – in an elementary way – a kind of “biography”, which facilitates development, “growing up”, and, thus, sustainability, including the opportunity – and temptation – of regression. Evaluating this “biography”, the “*childhood*” can be found in Antiquity and Middle ages, when adults encounter with each other in order to discuss the art of “good life”, depending on religious or on church programs or philosophical schools. The “*adolescence*” is characterized by becoming more and more independent from such institutional influences, which took place in the age of enlightenment. The “*adulthood*” began about 1800, when three types of people’s education could be observed: encounters of citizens oriented on nobility models (Salons), training of workers in towns (by educational societies and institutions), and agricultural training of peasants (Ahlheim, 1982; Englert, 1992; Seitter, 2007). Since the age of industrialization, modernization, and nationalization in the late 19th century, adult education in Europe, particularly in Germany, became a core instrument for social progress, when associations were founded which combined social purposes with educational methods and approaches (Knoll, 1988). After World War II, new educational concepts grew up, which recognized the new democratic era. In a similar way, in other European countries too, particularly in Scandinavian ones, adult learning increased in the late 19th century, facilitated by private institutions, in order to give people knowledge and information so they could participate in their community. During the last decades, many concepts of adult education changed or were provided alternatively, such as individual care oriented and social care oriented ones, with the common purpose of encouragement, participation and autonomy. Other sources and core elements are social purposes, based on the “*Volksbildung*” during the “Weimar Republic” (Veraguth, 1979), which was aimed at preventing manipulation through encouraging discussions in meetings and communities, scientific societies and via itinerant teachers and preachers and by exhibitions; thus, theological discussion facilitated deliverance and emancipation of the working people from oppression (Ahlheim; 1982).

In 1961, a main organization (DEAE, 1978) was founded which integrated the different academies and other institutions, with the purpose of attracting benefit from state support. Since 1989 in Europe, a new interest in catechism tradition emerged (Werner, 1994) because, after the Fall of the German Wall many people came together who were not baptized but curious about the Christian tradition. Thus, a new awareness of historical contexts becomes crucial for understanding the particular role of Protestant adult education in German and European society (Nuissl von Rein, 2010; Seiter, 2007), which explains how different contents, methods and styles of adult education could become sustainable by contextualization.

### Learning as a Balancing of Past, Current and Future Experiences

As an organic process, Protestant adult education integrates not only different approaches towards a particular content (individual, common, emotional, rational, active, meditative), but also past, current and future experiences in a holistic way. By remembering one’s own experiences with a biblical story or a current social problem, by exploring its current meaning and by imagining future developments and challenges, people gain a new, multidimensional and holistic understanding during the process of lifelong learning (Apsel, 1985). This integrative approach acknowledges the transformative theories of

adult learning (Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 1994, and Freire, 1990), which emphasize the intuitive, mythical and emotional sense of human experiences, the concreteness of the here-and-now, and the (individual and collective) unconscious as the primary source of creativity, vitality, and wisdom (Dirkx, 1997). Perspective transformation explains how the meaning structures that adults have acquired over a lifetime become transformed. These meaning structures are frames of reference that are based on the totality of individuals, cultural and contextual experiences, and influence how these individuals behave and interpret events (Taylor, 1998). Because narrative is a bridge to the other person, memory has a positive contribution to make in communities seeking reconciliation. Moments of catharsis represent nothing less than a hermeneutical shift from the horizon of the constructed Ego to the authentic Self, which is emphasized in philosophical (Heidegger, 1998) and spiritual tradition (Cohen, 2002).

In order to enable real reconciliation, the Jewish tradition is a crucial model because it recalls victims as well as blessings (Exodus, Shoa), and thus underlines remembering as a moral duty. Thanks to memory and the narratives that preserve the memory of the horrible, the horrible is prevented from being leveled off by explanation, or from being abused by the excesses of certain ‘commemorations and rituals, festivals and myths’ that attempt to fix memories in a ‘reverential relationship’ to the past, while ethical memory is restored with the good use of commemorative acts, over and above the abuses of ritualized commemoration (Duffy, 2009). As a work of ‘mourning’, memory becomes a source of reconciliation and an opportunity for new possibilities in the future. ‘Mourning’ the past and ‘working through’ what has happened there, must be brought together in the fight for the ‘acceptability’ of memories. Thus, forgiveness begins with a willingness to ‘share mourning’ (Ricoeur, 2004). In this context, empathy becomes a core attitude of remembrance sharing, particularly during discussions with people, who experienced cruelties in family; thus, empathy facilitates awareness of emotions, and allows voluntary participation (Boschki et. al., 2010).

Protestant adult education also can facilitate a healing of the past through memory by providing models from biblical tradition, such as the “*memoria passionis*” and “*imitatio Christi*” (Metz, 1998; Metz, 2007), and from history, such as Willy Brand, Vaclav Havel and others, who both begged forgiveness for the crimes against humanity committed by their predecessors. Thus, the dialogue between memory and forgetting becomes a source of sustainable healing and forgiveness concerning individual and collective memory, and even history written by historians, because narrative memory is never neutral, but told from a certain perspective. Therefore, narrative imagination can assist the ‘universalisation’ of remembering and, thus, facilitate sustainability by sharing memories, both individual and collective, in order to fulfill the ‘moral duty’ to remember as a means of paying the debt owed to all victims. These considerations underline that, for developing sustainable general education and worldview education pedagogy, narrative imagination is crucial for all ages of learners (Miedema, 2017), as is also acknowledging the role of culture for sustainable education (Laine, 2016).

### Encouraging Humans – Encouraging Humanity

As an important element of the organic character of (Protestant) adult education, not only the complex conceptual and contextual character of contents and methods, but also the aspect of remembrance becomes a core condition of sustainable education,

particularly when – in the German context – it focuses on the Nazi period in all shades and aspects, whether it is in the view of persons, places or topics, as demonstrated by the following examples of past – present – analogies, which are taken from Protestant adult education programs (Evangelisches Forum Muenster) during the last decade.

### Sustainable Elements of Coping with Totalitarian Regimes

When, for example, remembering the *Kreisau Circle*, a group of German dissidents centered on the estate of Helmuth James *Graf von Moltke* at Kreisau, Silesia (now Krzyżowa, Poland), the question of German opposition to the Nazi regime is emphasized, particularly the complexity of patriotic loyalty to Germany with opposition to the Nazis, when the Nazis had subverted the state to such an extent that the two were almost inextricable. Such remembrance, together with studying Molke's biography, facilitates coping with one's own family history, where similar considerations often occurred. Combined with excursions to Poland, the heritage of these events is kept alive. Such remembrance facilitates considering the coping with Nazi regime and with resistance during the years after 1945 and today: also remembering *Kurt Gerstein* (1905–1945), an SS officer assigned to the Hygiene Institute of the SS, and called upon to assist in the implementation of the "Final Solution". His hope to spread information about the Nazi cruelty and in this way to stop the movement, was in vain.

Comparing this dramatic biography of a historical whistle-blower with modern examples, such as Julian Assange and other Wikileaks members, facilitates awareness of the complex issue of responsibility of insiders. Because such – often hidden – experiences of German family and national memories not only concern the Nazi cruelties, but also the totalitarian system of Stalinism, also experiences concerning Gulag victims and eyewitnesses, or considering the life in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) with Stasi and demonstrations, belong to the programs of Protestant adult education and facilitate awareness of the different kinds of totalitarianism, as well as awareness of the particular situation in totalitarian systems which seem to develop in current times worldwide. Another core example for such analogies is the situation of (Latvian) Displaced Persons in Germany after 1945 (Franzenburg, 2016b), which can be compared with modern experiences of forced migration, displacement and integration. Therefore, learning about coping strategies within conflicts of any kind facilitates sustainability of such concepts by encouraging discussions about coping with oppression and suffering from different perspectives, and with different examples and contexts.

### Sustainability by Values

Concerning sustainability, the relationship between faith, religion and science is crucial to (Protestant and other) adult education, particularly concerning both the beginning of life (stem cells, embryos prior to pregnancy, modularized desire for children, reproductive medicine, prenatal diagnosis, genetic engineering), as well as its end (patients, euthanasia, transplantation medicine, coma, euthanasia for children). Because of the "dark" history of genetics and euthanasia during the Nazi regime, such considerations and discussions demonstrate how remembering facilitates sustainable responsibility by preventing stereotyping, and by considering how to draw common benefit from the opportunities of such research in the future.

## Remembrance as an Educational Method

Summarizing the evaluation of the different types of adult education workshops, it becomes clear that Protestant (and general) adult education integrates local and global, individual and collective, elementary and academic, aspects that have to do with caring for peace, justice and sustainability in any kind of expression. Therefore, such types of adult education go far beyond importing simple information, but attempt to transform the participant in the common and mutual process of learning by discourse or dialogue (Kroth & Cranton, 2014; Mezirow, 1991). Telling stories, reading stories from others and reading fiction all serve the purpose of exposing learners to alternative perspectives, a process that is at the heart of critical reflection and critical self-reflection, which is, in turn, is central to transformative learning (Jarvis, 2006) which, in particular concerns the revision of meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000), and focuses on the following steps of transformation (Kroth & Cranton, 2014):

- Experiencing a disorienting dilemma
- Undergoing a self-examination
- Feeling a sense of alienation from traditional social expectations
- Relating discontent as a reaction to similar experiences of others
- Exploring options for new ways of acting
- Building competence and self-confidence in new roles
- Planning a course of action
- Acquiring the knowledge and skills for implementing a new course of action
- Trying out new roles and assessing them
- Reintegrating into society with the new perspective

## Reconciliation of Memory Cultures as an Educational Aim

Working with authentic and congruent models combines individual and collective aspects of biographies and narrations, as demonstrated by the examples taken from adult education programs. Thus, the structuring of memory can be an opportunity for a more creative engagement with the past.

This can be exemplified by the Protestant core issue of 2017, the 500-year anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation 1517. Concerning Reformation Day (October 31) as a core element, the concept of “pedagogy of pardon” (Ricoeur, 2004) demonstrates that the leading narrative which belongs to this day, particularly in the secular world, tells about a new denomination which was founded by this action. It has, in combination with national attitudes, influenced the internal and external images which people envisaged about Luther by integrating other pictures, such as Luther in Worms. Such narratives have developed since the 19th century a certain celebration atmosphere, which emphasizes Luther as the “German hero” together with others, such as Bismarck; thus, as a national and political symbol this dominated for a long time the (nationalist) discourse about reformation and influenced the historical and theological knowledge of more secular oriented people. Therefore, widening the knowledge and preventing selectivity and stereotypes is a core challenge for Protestant adult education. Because such stereotypes challenge not only internal debates in Protestantism, but also influence ecumenical discourses, and maintain mutual violations and traumata, reconciliation is a core element of this common learning process by narrative sharing of experiences, and a future oriented common remembrance.



## Conclusions

After evaluating the Protestant adult education programs, the following points about sustainable adult education may be made:

Adult education combines – based on learning experiences in childhood – institutional and informal learning in a holistic way in a situation and learner oriented way. Adult education combines individual and collective experiences in a contextual way, in order to develop empathy for traumatic experiences and to develop strategies of model learning.

Adult education combines religious and secular values in an ecumenical and intercultural way in order to share the Christian message of the singular value of human dignity, which also influences the national constitutions of many nations and the philosophical thoughts of non-religious people.

Adult education combines regional and global adjustment in a contextualizing way, in order to understand the political, historical and economic backgrounds of regionally observed situations.

Adult education combines traditional and innovative settings in an integrative way, in order to draw benefit from encounters between very different approaches, attitudes or belief systems.

Adult education combines the conscious and unconscious sphere of personality in a holistic way, in order to become aware of emotions, stereotypes, visions, fears, traumatic and resource oriented experiences, and to integrate them into a multidimensional approach (including intercultural and intergenerational learning).

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