Thematic issue of RELA: Digitalisation and the Education and Learning of Adults

Submission deadline: 1 July, 2016

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Digitalisation, understood as 'the way in which many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructure' (Brennan & Kreis, 2014), is unmistakably a global megatrend permeating all walks of life. Manuel Castells (2010), views digitalization as one of the – if not *the* – defining characteristics of contemporary society. Some apologists euphorically announce the digital revolution. Jeremy Rifkin (2011) suggested that the emergence of the internet would cause a third industrial revolution. We have witnessed similar reactions time and again throughout history, when new media emerged. Their transformative potential was often welcomed enthusiastically. Yet, the promises also encountered profound scepticism. Plato criticized the transition from oral to written culture in Ancient Greece. He believed it would deteriorate the quality of the human memory. And, often the promises did not always bring the expected outcomes. 'Historians of technology would hardly be surprised to find more failures than success stories in this field' (Flichy, 1999, p. 33). So, a critical scrutiny of how the new media affect our society in general and (adult) education and learning in particular today is an important matter.

The "digital turn" definitely also affects various educational practices and policies. 'The technologies that become prevalent at a certain moment and at a certain place decide to a great extent what education is all about' (Vlieghe, 2015, p. 2). Media have been part of educational processes with divergent groups for a long time. The protestant revolt against the catholic church in the sixteenth century was enabled by the invention of the print media by Gutenberg and the subsequent popularizing of biblical texts. The French revolutionaries were inspired by the writings of the enlightened philosophers. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, citizens, workers and farmers achieved emancipation through participation in reading circles, through their membership in libraries, through exposure to radio and television programmes and through participation in distance learning institutions. Today, the new media are omnipresent. They do new things. 'They give us new powers. They create consequences for us as human beings. They bend minds. They transform institutions. They liberate. They oppress' (Silverstone, 1999, p. 10). Or, in the prophetic words of Marshall McLuhan (1964), they are 'the extensions of man'. Knowledge and information are accessible almost at any time and any place. They create opportunities but also risks for educational practices. Social media such as twitter, facebook and youtube are being used in educational activities. Massive open online courses (MOOCS) are welcomed as the new instrument to democratize higher education. Much has been written and discussed about these developments in education in general (Wildemeersch, 1991, Losh, 2014; Walsh, 2014). However, the reflection with regard to the relevance and the effects of the new media in practices

and theories of adult education remains fairly underexposed. This issue of RELA attempts to compensate for this. Contributors are invited to present their research regarding the use of new media in the context of adult education and learning practices and policies. Following assumptions concerning the changes taking place may inspire their contributions.

Learning places and learning spaces
The traditional learning places of adult education are being complemented by the media and the rise of the internet. New communication spaces emerge and the connection between online and off-line spaces increases. This raises questions about new forms of access to adult education provision and the possible redistribution of educational opportunities for varied groups of adults.

New learning formats and new experiments with media education
Currently various new learning formats are being developed, from "game based" learning to "mobile learning". Experiments with new social media emerge in adult education practices. Different forms of action oriented media education are being implemented. The new media create opportunities for interactive and co-creative processes.

Media literacy in the digital world.
The idea of being literate in contemporary society changes dramatically. Vlieghe claims that 'There is a fundamental difference between traditional and digital literacy, or more precisely between *what it means to be a literate person in digital and pre-digital times*' (2015, p. 10). This may have profound impact on how to organise adult basic education in the future. And, of course the threat of a new great divide between digital literates and digital illiterates (Mok & Leung, 2012) is of major concern also to adult education.

Changing meaning of knowledge and knowledge production and diffusion
Access to the internet with the help of diverse media currently makes knowledge ubiquitously available. The Web 2.0 stands for the creation and exchange of user-generated content through Blogs, Wikis, Twitter and other social media. Virtual/networked learning communities may transform practices of adult education. Benkler (2006, in Brennan & Kreiss) argues that 'peer' or 'social' production can take shape for the first time on a global scale. The rapidly falling costs of the production and distribution of digital information, enables peer production to compete with market mechanisms of producing knowledge and culture. The rise of digital media implies that it costs little to create and disseminate everything from digital movies to political commentary on blogs.

New discourse on education and learning and the role of adult educators
The new technologies strongly impact on the way education and learning are currently conceived of. The presence of digital environments influences the shift in the discourses from education to learning, described by Biesta (2013) as the 'learnification' of education. In his view, this process is visible in 'the tendency to refer to education as "teaching and learning", to refer to students as "learners" and to adults as "adult learners", to see teachers as "facilitators of learning" and to conceive of schools as "learning environments" of "places of learning" (..). The shift from "adult

education" to "lifelong learning" is another prominent manifestation of the rise of this "new language of learning'" (Biesta, 2013, p. 62).

Informal learning processes and formal educational systems

New media affect the relationship between informal, non-formal and formal learning/education in many respects. There is an intensified policy to formally recognize self-directed learning experiences in the informal contexts of the internet, but also an increased blurring of the borders between non-formal forms of adult and continuing education and formal educational systems. This is clearly the case for the proliferation of MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) provided by universities resulting into (chargeable) certificates. This may also apply to the recent establishment of the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE, 2015) by the European Commission.

New resources: MOOCS and new learning industries

In spite of the fact that the initial enthusiasm for these MOOCS has decreased, the recent dynamics demonstrates an impressive transformation (Schulmeister, 2013). Two to three years ago, the initiative resulted from a reaction against expensive fees for university courses. Today 16 million students study at the online college Cousera, which delivers a provision across 130 institutes. This process shows, as well as the videos of the Khan Academy that have been downloaded half a billion times from youtube, that new free provisions presented on the internet reach big numbers of target groups. This development will not be limited to the level of higher education. The immense popularity of the TED-conferences on youtube demonstrates the power of digital provision that opens new opportunities for marketization, as the commercialization of the TED-books demonstrates. Increasingly new societal models are being experimented, which raises questions about the balance between private and public provision (Weiland, 2015). Simultaneously the digital users are becoming increasingly transparent. Their data and profiles resulting from 'data mining', generate automatic learning profiles that are valuable for big IT-companies/learning industries and publishers.

Open Educational Resources (OER) for development purposes

Open Educational Resources are freely accessible documents and media that are used for educational and research goals. The development and promotion of open educational resources is often motivated by a desire to counter the commodification of knowledge and provide an alternate educational paradigm (OER, 2015). Stimulated by supranational organisations like UNESCO and the OECD, varied materials and resources are made available online. In their case, this provision is primarily directed at developing countries rather than at industrialized countries. The ambition of these initiatives is to facilitate the access to knowledge. Related to this, new questions arise. How will this provision be financed? And is there a danger of a new kind of 'banking education' (Freire, 1972), since this provision could install new vertical relationships between producers and receivers of knowledge and between nations?

Important political issues

The developments described above, and their related assumptions about how digital media affect society as a whole and (adult) educational practices in particular, raise

important political issues. Policy-makers are becoming increasingly aware how digitalisation transforms our culture, our economy, our individual and social behaviours. The current president of the European parliament observes that the totality of our society changes through digitalisation. 'This can only be compared – if at all - with the industrial revolution of the 18th and the 19th century, that also produced social, economic, cultural, urban and climate changes. In its wake new political powers came forth, that put emerging social questions on the agenda' (Schulz, 2015, p. 6, translation DW). However, one could also argue that policy-makers increasingly describe digitisation as "solutions" to various social problems, whereby adult lifelong learning is described as central in order to enable this. They could be seen as drivers of the increasing digitisation, while technology is provided by a keen industry. In line with this, digital skills are placed at the core of programmes and initiatives of the Lisbon Agenda, and it is described by the European Commission (2015) as necessary to meet the *Europe 2020* strategy for lifelong learning. Today the rise of digital culture raises questions that inevitably also need to be addressed by adult educators, by adult education researchers and in adult education practices, if they want to remain relevant in present-day and future society. There are issues of democracy and participation taking new directions through the new media. There is the issue of digital literacy and the new divide related to it. There is the issue of a one-sided ICT skills orientation in policy-making on lifelong learning. There are the issues of privacy, of data protection and the freedom of expression, which became very prominent with the rise of new forms of terrorism. There is the issue of the private and the public provision of knowledge. There is the issue of new opportunities for education and learning, but also of new dependencies and hierarchies. There is the issue of job-destruction and job-creation. Many more issues related to the present digital transformations are waiting to be dealt with in societal debates, but also in places, spaces and courses of adult education.

Scholars are invited to reflect on these issues and present the results of their theoretical and empirical research and studies in the upcoming volume of RELA. Following questions may inspire their contributions:
- What new learning spaces and learning formats are being developed?
- How does digitalisation change practices of the education and learning of adults?
- How do the digital infrastructures influence the education and learning of adults?
- What are the consequences of the digital change for the institutions and for the adult education professions?
- How are discourses, publicity and responsibility transformed through the omnipresence of new media?
- What policy-making tendencies can be observed regarding the connection between digitalisation and adult education and learning?
- What are epistemological aspects of the digital transformation?

We invite paper on any of the above topics. Papers should be submitted to danny.wildemeersch@ppw.kuleuven.be and wjuette@uni-bielefeld.de no later than July 1st, 2016.

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