Doing Crossing Boundaries

Adult Education as a Translational Practice

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The following remarks are concerned with how adult education can be described in terms of a translational practice. They follow on from a number of papers which have previously discussed this topic (e.g. Dewe, 2000; Thompson, 2017; Engel & Köngeter, 2019; Dinkelaker, Ebner von Eschenbach & Kondratjuk, 2020; Dinkelaker, 2023), yet introduce another angle by emphasizing the question of how translation and participation interrelate in educational settings.

The paper begins with a somewhat abstract, nevertheless highly specific concept of translation, defining it as a social practice that is grounded in two intertwined assumptions. First, this practice recognizes and embraces the existence of diverse contexts of meaning. The significance and relevance of something (such as words, texts, objects, ideas or actions) within one context differs from its significance and relevance within another. Second, translation recognizes the possibility for meaningful elements to traverse the boundaries between these contexts through specific operations, which we refer to as 'translating'. By being translated, the translated elements are somehow transformed on the one hand and preserved on the other (Gal, 2015), so that meaning may be transferred, even though the semiotic context has been changed.

Starting from this definition, the paper aims to investigate whether adult education can be characterized as a practice in which crossings of context boundaries and changes in participation status become systematically entangled.

To lay the foundation for such a performative perspective on interrelations between translation, boundary crossing, and participation, the paper begins with a discussion of how these phenomena can be defined as an ongoing collaborative accomplishment. This allows us to focus on the procedural dimensions of this entanglement (Section 1).

Section 2 identifies two distinct configurations (in the sense of patterns of features which frame the dynamics of a situation) in which translation and participation co-unfold. In configurations of 'cross-boundary communication' (Section 2.1), translations are accomplished in order to make ideas or objects from one semiotic context understandable and accessible within another. Achieving this involves reconfigurations of the frameworks of participation within the target context. In configurations of 'cross-boundary participation' (Section 2.2), the ambition is to enable individuals who come from outside a specific semiotic context to participate effectively within it. This requires a process of translation to facilitate mutual understanding and exchange of ideas.

Although both of these configurations are described in the existing literature on the nature of adult education, they have not yet been explored in relation to one another. The final section (Section 3) of this paper addresses this issue by examining how these two configurations may be interrelated.

1 Boundary Crossing: A Performative View on Relations between Participating and Translating

Our considerations start with some issues of definition as the undertaking at hand requires concepts in which translating and participating can be described in terms of ongoing accomplishments instead of seeing them as, for example, concluded acts or stable states.

We begin with the most challenging question of how *participation* may be described as something that is performed and that includes more than just the person's belonging to the activity in which they participate (Section 1.1). We then take a closer look at how *boundaries* of activity contexts are established and maintained and what it could

mean when we say that these boundaries are crossed (Section 1.2). With this in mind, we then explore what is meant by the term *translation* when we define it as the act of conveying the meaning of something from one context to another (Section 1.3).

1.1 Doing Participation

A common understanding of participation defines it as the involvement of people in a social activity.[1] In this notion, participation is regarded either as a feature of the activities in which people are involved, or as a feature of the persons who are involved in the activity. Participation appears here to lack a distinct processual dimension of its own.

In the search for a definition of participation that emphasizes this performative dimension, valuable insights can be found in studies focusing on talk in interaction. In the context of these studies, participation is specified as making one's involvement observable: "The term participation refers to actions demonstrating forms of involvement performed by parties within evolving structures of talk" (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004, p. 222).

From this perspective, participating implies the continuous and contextual process of actively making one's involvement noticeable and recognizable. This ongoing task of making visible who is involved, and in which ways, is a challenge which has to be handled collaboratively by all of those who take part. Analysis of multimodal interaction using video footage allows very close observations of how such activities of doing participation are performed in any moment of the ongoing process of interaction, and how these displays of participation are necessary for the participants for "building in concert with each other the actions that define and shape their lifeworld" (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004, p. 223). Rather than participation being just a feature of activities, such that this

1 "Social participation can be defined as a person's involvement in activities that provide interaction with others in society or the community" (Levasseur et al. 2010, 2148).

activity may exist before and beyond participation, this notion of participation puts it the other way round. What is recognized as the actions performed together is derived from the ways in which participation in this activity is demonstrated (cf. Goffman, 1963). To understand, how participation is enacted, one can ask how involvement is displayed.

However, participation is not limited to local face-to-face interactions. To comprehend the broader dimensions of participation, we can adduce additional insights from the social world perspective. David Unruh's 1979 paper, 'Characteristics and Types of Participation in Social Worlds', identifies four distinct participation statuses that reflect the varying ways in which individuals demonstrate their engagement within a particular context of activity. Participants being labeled as 'strangers', 'tourists', 'regulars', or 'insiders' is connected to certain behavioral characteristics. Each of these participation statuses involves the behavioral display of a unique combination of orientations, experiences, relationships, and levels of commitment. Referring to Georg Simmel (1908), Unruh defines the stranger as a person who is perceived as coming from outside, but staying. Participation in this status is, according to Unruh, characterized by 'naivete', 'disorientation', 'superficiality' and 'detachment'. Tourists, by contrast, are persons who "enter already-established worlds in search of a certain 'kind' of experience imbued with meaning" (p. 118), while regulars are typified by their 'habituation', 'integration', 'familiarity' and 'attachment'. Finally, insiders are characterized by their engagement in the "creation of the world for others" and are perceived as maintaining "intimate relationships with participants" and having a strong commitment to the group activity, as well as to the "recruitment of new members" (p. 120).

All four participation statuses that Unruh describes refer to the boundaries of the shared activity contexts (i.e., the social worlds) in which the participants get involved. These boundaries serve to demarcate the activity context at hand from an imagined outside, which lies beyond it. Strangers and tourists are defined by their stemming from this beyond. The status of insiders is defined by being concerned with questions of representing the shared context of activity to persons outside, and so on. Furthermore, the differentiation of participation

statuses implies boundaries *within* the shared context of activity. All participants – strangers, tourist, regulars and insiders – are involved in the shared activities of the social world, but they are involved differently.

For a more detailed and nuanced understanding of how the dynamics of participating unfold, we need to examine more closely how collaborative demonstrations of involvement are related to processes of regenerating boundaries.

1.2 Maintaining and Transforming Social Boundaries

As illustrated above, participating in a shared activity implies the notion of boundaries that define what and who is involved and what and who is not. Participating, hence, is a way of a person's ongoing demonstration of their relation to the boundaries of the activity. The analysis of how participation is performed, therefore, has to include the question of how social boundaries are established, maintained and transformed.

In reference to social boundaries, people are placed inside or outside, at the center or at the periphery of defined contexts of activity. These boundaries, however, are not stable entities themselves. They are formed and developed dynamically during the process of participation. Michele Lamont and Virág Molnár elaborate on these dynamics in their paper 'The study of boundaries in the social sciences'. They start by defining *symbolic* boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (2002, p. 168). *Social* boundaries are established, enforced and transformed by applying symbolic boundaries to matters of participation. When social boundaries are performed, symbolic boundaries are used to establish differences between an *us* and a *them*. Social boundaries "are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p. 168).

Participation and the actualization of social boundaries are therefore mutually intertwined. Social boundaries are established, maintained and transformed when symbolic boundaries are used to demarcate who belongs to a specific context of activity and in which position. And

showing the involvement of a person in a specific activity context implies references to its boundaries. By shifting the focus to how boundaries are established and negotiated, rather than assuming a preconceived notion of what constitutes a boundary, we may gain a more nuanced understanding of how participation and translation are performed. As Abbott suggests, this approach allows us to examine the "things of boundaries" rather than simply searching for the "boundaries of things" (1995, p. 857.)

This perspective has important implications for how we can describe education as an occurrence, in which a person's participation status is intentionally changed. As has already been shown elsewhere, learning can be described in terms of an ongoing process of changing a person's participation status within a stable context of activity, here named as communities of practice (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). The vector against which learning is demonstrated leads from peripheral participation to the entitlement of responsibility for core aspects of the activity. If we understand education as the purposeful facilitation of learning, education can, hence, be seen as a social practice in which a transformation in the participants' participation status is induced (cf. Dinkelaker, 2008; Dinkelaker & Wyßuwa, 2023). This notion of education, however, remains focused on a process which occurs *within* the social boundaries that define a context of participation.

Looking at how adult education is performed, we are, however, confronted with the fact that settings of education do not only operate within social boundaries, but also aim at crossing them. This is the point where the concept of translation becomes relevant.

1.3 Crossing Boundaries by Accomplishing Translation

Translation implies the expectation that social boundaries can not only be established and maintained, but that they can also be transcended. To discuss this, we begin with the following definition: "Translation in its broadest sense is the expression in one semiotic system of what has been said, written, or done in another" (Gal, 2015, p. 227).

This definition of translation places communication at the forefront, emphasizing that translation requires the existence of multiple semiotic contexts. Translation comes with the presupposition that expressions only gain meaning when understood in reference to the specific semiotic context in which they are used. Furthermore, translation insinuates that something that has been expressed in one semiotic context can also be expressed within another, and that the expressed something somehow remains the same, even though it is expressed in a different way and related to another web of significances. Translation has to start from this assumption, even though it is obvious that any translation comes with a certain shift in what can be meant since any semiotic context founds its own unique horizon of meaning. The assumption of translatability is maintained despite the fact that the meaning of any expression depends on the specific context in which it is produced. Translation, hence, has to deal with a fuzzy simultaneity of otherness and sameness. Since this crossing necessarily has to assume that specific boundaries exist, the bounding and demarcation is also renewed. Hence, translation is a specific type of "doing languages" (Auer, 2022). Translation is thereby not merely bringing over something or somebody from one semiotic context to another: it has to be accompanied by a collaborative handling of the distinctions between them.

This definition of translation does not, however, specify how issues of participation are involved in such translational practices. However, we may yet find a link to these issues when we consider semiotic contexts as being contexts of activity (and vice versa). On the one hand, it has been argued that language use itself is an activity in which people are participating. The concept of speech communities emphasizes how issues of belonging and involvement are made relevant so that members can distinguish insiders from outsiders, those passing as members from those living in contact zones and borderlands (Morgan, 2004, p. 18). On the other hand, any form of social activity presumes the assumption of a shared semiotic system (Morgan, 2004, p. 3). Crossing the boundaries between contexts (of activity and meaning) implies addressing participants as belonging to one or to another sign using community of practice (cf. Star & Griesemer, 1989; Bowker & Star, 1999).

2 Two Kinds of Crossing: How Translation and Participation Co-Unfold

Translation allows communication across the boundaries of activity contexts. When a translational practice is established and maintained, this has effects on the opportunities of demonstrating participation. This nexus emerges in two different configurations.

The first configuration occurs when something (a message, a text or an object) is brought from outside an activity context to inside it, to be utilized by those participating in it. The integration of these imported expressions, ideas or objects demands translators who are able to interpret the sense in which they are used in the context of origin and are, at the same time, able to point out the relevance of their use in the new context. One could call this configuration cross-boundary communication (Section 2.1).

The second configuration arises when people enter a semiotic context of activity with which they are not (yet) familiar. In order for this people to get involved in the activities at hand, translation has to be accomplished. One has to translate because it is necessary to understand the newcomers, what they say and how they act. And one has to translate, because the novice needs to understand what is said and done in this community. We can call this translational configuration cross-boundary participation (Section 2.2).

2.1 Shifting Frames of Participation by Cross-Boundary Communication

In configurations of cross-boundary communication something that originates from another semiotic context is marked as relevant and interesting. Since those who participate as regulars are not expected to be familiar with the foreign semiotic conventions, they have no independent access to the imported ideas. Hence, translation has to be arranged in order for them to be involved in related activities. A characteristic framework of doing participation emerges around this issue of borrowing relevant foreign ideas. A new boundary is established, between

those who can deal with the original because they are familiar with the foreign context and those who cannot. Thus, the polyglots turn into a kind of insider who has exclusive access to relevant knowledge or information. By means of translation, this group of people who have access to the borrowed concept or object is expanded. However, the difference between those who deal with the translated version of the import, and those who deal with the original version persists. In addition to this, a second social boundary emerges between those who have access to the translation and those who do not. The formation of boundaries within cross-boundary communication configurations is shaped by the politics surrounding the attribution of relevance to foreign concepts and the politics of granting access to their translations.

One of the most well-known instances of transforming frameworks of participation through cross-boundary communication is Martin Luther's translation of the Christian Bible. He aimed to enable new ways of participating in religious practices by allowing believers to read the religious texts on their own, independent of those who were able to read it in the languages of origin. This was intended to result in non-ordained believers in religious practices no longer being seen as laypersons, but accepted as competent practitioners of biblical exegesis. However, history shows that those who were able to read the texts in the original languages still retained a specific status of participation.

In terms of theories of education, we can identify a discourse tradition, in which adult education is discussed as a such a configuration of cross-boundary communication. Conventionally, two semiotic contexts are marked as being involved in these translations: the context of scientific knowledge production and the context of knowledge appliance in everyday life. Adult education is defined as the practice in which knowledge, which has been developed in the context of academia, is made accessible and usable in the context of the non-academic contexts. Knowledge is transferred from its source in science to the life-worlds of the general population (Dewe, 1996; Hof, 2001) or to specific professionalized social worlds (Thompson, 2017; Wyßuwa, 2014). Performing adult education in this way establishes a specific framework of participation (cf. Dinkelaker, 2023): Learners are characterized as persons who do not

understand the meaning of scientific knowledge on their own because they are not familiar with the specific disciplinary practices in which the knowledge was established. Educators are addressed as, and thus given the status of being able to communicate in both contexts – the scientific discipline that they are experts in, and the specific life worlds in which they enter the stage as translators. By taking part in adult education, academic knowledge is made accessible to the learners.

2.2 Enabling Cross-Boundary Participation

Configurations of cross-boundary participation are characterized by persons being involved in an activity context in which they are identified as somebody who previously belonged to another context and therefore are not familiar with the local semiotic conventions. Translation is requested in such configurations when mutual understanding between such newcomers and the regulars and insiders is sought. This becomes possible when persons can be identified as interpreters who are ascribed as being knowledgeable and proficient in both the source and the target context. Only these interpreters are supposed to be able to communicate directly with newcomers as well as with regulars. In these interpreting situations, three kinds of participating are differentiated. One party participates as newcomers, who are not familiar with the local context; the second party is ascribed the status of regulars, who are familiar with the local but not with the foreign context. The third party, the interpreters, are expected to be able to understand and to be understood in both contexts. Despite the interpreters' specific competence, which enables them to bridge the communication gap between the newcomers and the regulars, their participation status is strongly limited: their agency is limited to repeating the statements and actions of others while using a different language and, sometimes, explaining what is meant. They are in the position of an intermediary, transmitting messages between, rather than fully participating in, the activity contexts themselves. Regulars and newcomers are also limited in their agency when an interpreter is present as they have to rely on

the interpreters when they want to be understood and when they want to understand. Hence, interpreting establishes its own framework of participation, with a unique set of participation statuses and unique demands of coordination. The dynamics of such interpreting settings depend on how the boundaries between the contexts at hand are defined and how participants are positioned in relation to them (Dizdar, 2020, 2021).

For the purpose of this paper, it is of particular interest that adult education has also been described as a configuration of cross-boundary participation (cf. Kade, 1997). Learners are characterized as novices, who first have to become familiar with the new context. Educators are characterized as interpreters who are able to understand the learners as well as the practices, which are new to them. They are, hence, characterized as mediators who make context-specific meaning accessible for newcomers. Such an approach sets itself apart from traditional education concepts, where learners are viewed as being solely assimilated into and guided through the conventions of the given semiotic context. It, instead, highlights the importance of considering that the learners come from specific semiotic backgrounds which must be considered permanently within the educational process. This implies a bidirectional channel of translation. Not only do the newcomers have to understand how the regulars behave in a specific context of activity, but knowledge that the newcomers bring with them should also be made accessible. Instead of just aligning newcomers to a context, adult education here means to establish situations in which people are enabled to interact with one another despite living in multiple semiotic worlds (see Renn, 2006; Fuchs, 2023; Auer, 2022).

3 Crossings in Two Directions: Translations of Knowledge in Adult Education

As shown above, adult education may or may not be understood as a translational practice. If we understand education simply as a means of guiding individuals through a specific context of activity from a posi-

tion of peripheral participation to a more central one, then we may not need to consider references to differing semiotic contexts. If we assume, however, that adult education involves crossing social boundaries, then the concept of translation becomes crucial to understanding what takes place in such configurations.

Confusingly, we can identify two different ways of describing education as a translational practice. One description starts from the assumption that education is about introducing ideas and concepts from elsewhere in an existing practice. The other starts from the assumption that education is about introducing people to a context of activity with which they are not familiar. This duality of descriptions demands an explanation. Are there possibly two different kinds of translational practice, both of which are called adult education? Or is there only one kind of translational practice which may be described in two different manners depending on the chosen point of view?

Empirical observations of what happens in social settings of adult education (e.g., Nolda, 1996; Kade, Nolda, Dinkelaker & Herrle, 2014; Dinkelaker & Wyßuwa, 2023) suggest that the second interpretation may be more appropriate. Both kinds of boundary crossing have been observed in adult education despite each implying another translational configuration. While the two translational configurations can easily be differentiated analytically, they usually co-occur within the actual conduct of educational practices and often become entangled in messy mixtures. Empirically, it can be difficult to differentiate which of the two configurations is at play in any given situation as not only are they often intertwined and interdependent, the involved persons also negotiate what kind of boundary crossing has to be handled in the given situation. It can be observed on the one hand, that adult education is performed as a practice of importing foreign concepts. This is accomplished, however, not just by translating texts and making them accessible: huge efforts are made to arrange settings of interaction in which interpreting-like situations are established. On the other hand, adult education can be seen as a kind of interaction in which mutual understanding is facilitated by interpreters. This is accomplished, however, without being the regulars at the site. In fact, the educators are appointed as a sort of proxy

for those who usually participate in the context to which the learners are being introduced. Hence, each of the two distinct interpretations of the translational nature of adult education is incomplete on its own and gives a complete picture only when combined with the other. As a result, adult education may be described as a peculiar hybridization of cross-boundary communication and cross-boundary participation.

In conclusion, it should be noted that although adult education can be described in terms of a translational practice, it does not have to be understood in that way. There are, furthermore, two different ways of characterizing the translational practices which are accomplished by education. Thus, it ultimately depends on decisions, whether education is treated as a translational practice, and which kind of translational configuration is chosen to define the situation at hand. These decisions, however, as shown above, have consequences. They affect which options of participation may be established and which will stay barred. They involve the question of which contexts are seen as foreign and which as local, and how educators and learners are placed in relation to these contexts and their boundaries. Therefore, a responsible approach to adult education would involve analyzing the specific local decisions that shape educational conduct as a translational practice. The considerations above may help in navigating some of the related issues.

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