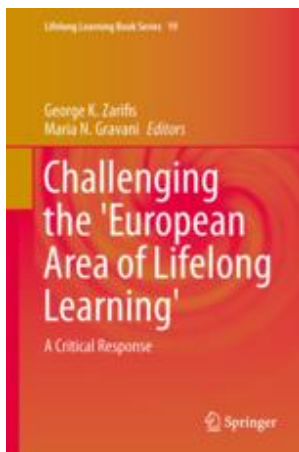


Challenging the "European Area of Lifelong Learning" A Critical Response

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To challenge something means to doubt it just as well as to dare it. "Challenging the European Area of Lifelong Learning" is the title of a Collection of articles from 37 authors, representing sort of an academic community in the field of European adult education, edited by Maria N. Gravani and George K. Zarifis. The book bases on the „Memorandum of Lifelong Learning“, therefore it is organized into five parts that quasi trail the structure of the Memorandum. These five aspects represents also „the core issues that Europe faces today in relation to the idea of making a ‘European Area of Lifelong Learning’ a reality“, so the editors voice.

The parts are as follows:

- Part I: Lifelong Learning and New Basic Skills for All
- Part II: Lifelong Learning and More Investment in Human Resources
- Part III: Lifelong Learning, Innovative Teaching and Learning and Rethinking Guidance and Counselling
- Part IV: Lifelong Learning and Valuing Learning
- Part V: Lifelong Learning and Bringing Learning Closer to Home

In their Introduction the editors refer at first the history of the actual concept: „The ‘Memorandum’ has tried to respond (probably very persuasively) to the ongoing debate amongst European policymakers, social partners and scholars on the reasons why the time is right to promote active citizenship and employability as two equally important and interrelated aims for our societies.“ From the early beginning the idea of Lifelong Learning in Europe was coupled with neo-liberal policy, and with the formation and organization of the European Union, as an economic and marketing area, more than an cultural area. Therefore the Memorandum became the most influential but also the most dissimulated policy. In present time the European Area is very pressed from the ongoing socio-economic crisis, which still threatens the foundations of the European imagery. So what are now the connections between education,

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policy, economy and market? And what are the meanings of these words and their impact for educational theory and practice as well? As Gravani and Zarifis argue, it is now the time to contemplate on the validity of the semantics of globalisation and the authority that resides behind them. From this lens they see the purpose of this book is to critically reflect on the context in which lifelong learning policies and practices are organised in Europe with the contribution of people who are working in the field either as researchers or as policymakers.

A very remarkable article is written by Katharina Popovic. On my opinion it demonstrates the way, in which the debate have to turn, if it will become more seriously and more scientifically. Popovic analyzed the rhetoric backgrounds of the ‚Memorandum‘ and its impact in reference to the concept of skills and competencies as a paradigmatic representative of educational policy. She highlights the difficulties around the concept of ‚skills‘, that dominate European policy since the ‚Memorandum‘ and the Communication about it, were launched. Popovic, a Serbian researcher with a long-time experience in European policy, exposes here in which way an educational problem was influenced from economic needs, and she asks: „Why is the notion of skills limited in its appropriateness for the area of education? As the term comes from human capital theory, reflecting in its nature the world of work, it is not really adequate for the world of education“. On her opinion the serious problem with skills is their value-free character, and that attempts to include attitudes to the definition that skills are not grounded, while some of the most important questions of human life, such as values, ethics and emotions are untouched by the concept of skills.

The special feature of Katharina Popovic's statement is given by opening a theoretical discussion that was missed in the past. It was very common in the last time to make and publish studies or surveys grounded with a very thin theoretical basis or with a theory that seems in the first instance based on political needs. Maybe in the next time, we will have more questions than answers, what at least is a characteristic of philosophical thinking. Anyway if philosophizing marks also the traditional roots of pedagogical thinking, we need to return to these roots. The demand of the book, as the editors posted, should be to start a critical discussion and to offering an analytic and systematic outlook of the main challenges in creating the „European Area of Lifelong Learning“. Popovic shows us, what it needs, to satisfy this high demand. It is a great effort of the authors, that they do not persist in a general critic at the idea of a European Education Area. Finally they strike new paths, in which Lifelong Learning is less a political question and more a philosophical approach to make humans human. „A critical response“ is the books under title. But it's more. In some articles one arises the possibility of how the image of an „European Area of Lifelong Learning“ can be realized by giving space for critical thinking and discussions not only following the political mainstream.