



Università degli Studi di Ferrara – Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici  
**Educational Studies in a Comparative Perspective:  
Italian and European Situations**

Session I: Lifelong Education – 8 ottobre 2013

**La storiografia dell'*Educazione degli adulti* in Italia:  
un sentiero smarrito**

**The historiography of *Adult Education* in Italy:  
a missing way**

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# 1. Preamble

## **The Italian situation concerning the historiography of Adult Education:**

**a) Provide a brief analysis of certain types of Italian studies of history of Adult Education**

**b) Provide critical remarks relating to the quality / quantity of the Italian studies of history of Adult Education**

**c) Put forward proposals to relaunch the Italian research in the field of the history of Adult Education**

## **2. A brief analysis of certain types of Italian studies of history of Adult Education**

**In Italy, the study of history of Adult Education can be subdivided essentially into three approaches:**

- 1) Explaining – at the beginning of a book/essay (especially if it is a manual, a compendium), for example – some steps of historical evolution of Adult Education (generic and broad overview of history of Adult Education)**
- 2) Focusing on just a few highlights of the history of Adult Education, for example, a deeper study of some of its scholars and milestones in its development**
- 3) Rediscovering the classics, for example deepening knowledge of a work or an author whose contribution in Adult Education can be considered a benchmark, because it has been able to express topical ideas**

### **3. Some critical remarks relating to the quality / quantity of the Italian studies of the history of Adult Education**

**3.1 About the first way of approaching** (generic and broad overview of the history of Adult Education at the beginning of a book/essay as a manual, a compendium of Adult Education)

**These historical excursus can take diversified guiding criteria:**

- a) In certain cases, the historical reconstruction begins from the ancient world, for example proposing a panoramic starting from Plato, approaching Comenius, Grundtvig, French and Industrial Revolutions; sometimes, the excursus can be even more limited**
- b) In certain cases, the starting point of the history of Adult Education could be Grundtvig's thought and activity (the Folk Schools); subsequently, this historical panoramic regarding Nineteenth and Twentieth Century socio-cultural movements (adult literacy); and lastly, focusing on UNESCO and its educational policies for adults**
- c) In certain cases, the historical view becomes clear through a comparison between some disciplines, especially between Pedagogy and Philosophy, identifying in the History of Philosophy thought systems concerning adulthood as foundation of Adult Education;**
- d) In certain cases, the historical dimension of Adult Education emerges by analyzing the symbolic, literary, iconographic etc. representations of adulthood; these representations suggest a reconstruction of the history of Adult Education in the history of culture, historical anthropology, art history, religions etc.**

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- ✓ **All these different ways testify, fundamentally, to the need for a historical reconstruction of Adult Education: consciously or unconsciously, the history of Adult Education is considered necessary to understand the deepest meaning of Adult Education, to understand the adult identity, but also to understand the meaning of education *tout court*, and it is necessary to acquire conceptual tools to interpret the complexity of our time**
  - ✓ **However, the history of Adult Education may be overlooked, becoming a mere rhetorical preamble or an appendix; its section in a book is often quantitatively very much reduced, and it is often titled with words such as overview, panoramic, outline, notes etc.**

### 3. Some critical remarks relating to the quality / quantity of the Italian studies of history of Adult Education

3.2 About the **second way** of approaching (focusing on just a few highlights of the history of Adult Education, for example, a deeper study of some of its scholars and milestones in its development)

There are two very important Italian books, both published in the Seventies, a period of "enthusiasm" for Adult Education in the European and Italian contexts.

**a) Anna Lorenzetto, *Lineamenti storici e teorici dell'educazione permanente*, Roma, Studium, 1976**

Lorenzetto considers Grundtvig as initiator of the history of Adult Education, but emphasizing its origins must be searched in a more comprehensive social, cultural and political ferment, of which she shows significant moments (Mansbridge's activities in England, the Italian popular universities etc.). Then, she focuses on UNESCO and its activities. In fact, the book as a whole is dedicated to UNESCO, from the first conference of Elsinore in 1949 up to its action in Seventies. Lorenzetto presents the documentary sources, and she also points out the fundamental theoretical concepts about an educational theory, in her vision of Adult Education: the utopian goals of education, first of all, and its democratic inspiration, empowerment

**b) Filippo Maria De Sanctis, *L'educazione permanente*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1979**

The temporal range considered is very large: from the Sophists up to contemporary thinkers and educators (historical epochs and philosophers rarely mentioned in other studies of Adult Education: St. Augustine, Monasticism, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Rousseau, Dewey etc.). However, it isn't merely a list, but an extended reflection that relates educational conception and management of power. Paradoxically, for De Sanctis, the history of lifelong education doesn't exist: a *veritable* lifelong education has yet to be started

**c) Other studies:**

S. Meghnagi (a cura di), *Cento anni di educazione alla democrazia. Il caso della Cgil*, Roma, Ediesse, 2008

F. Farinelli, *Lungo il corso della vita. L'educazione degli adulti dopo le 150 ore: opportunità e forme*, Roma, Ediesse, 2004

L. Bellatalla, D. Ritrovato, *Per tutta la vita. Riflessioni introduttive all'educazione permanente*, Parma, Ricerche Pedagogiche, 1996

H. A. Cavallera (a cura di), *La formazione degli adulti tra le due guerre mondiali*, Lecce, Pensa Multimedia, 2008

### 3. Some critical remarks relating to the quality / quantity of the Italian studies of history of Adult Education

#### 3.3 About the **third way** of approaching (rediscovering the classics as benchmarks of Adult Education development)

**Maria Luisa De Natale, *N.F.S. Grundtvig Pedagogista e Educatore Danese*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1980**

Usually, Grundtvig (1783-1872) is mentioned as the founder of adult educators in synthetic and stereotyped biographies. But, in this essay, De Natale provides a detailed biography, the fundamentals of his thought, the context, the pedagogical view and educational activity, using his writings extracts and outlining an articulated and complex profile, unlike what is often found in essay writing.

More recently, in Italy, there have been translations of and commentaries on **Malcolm S. Knowles (1913-1997)**, with particular attention to the aspects of teaching methodology among adults, motivational aspects and experiential learning in adulthood.

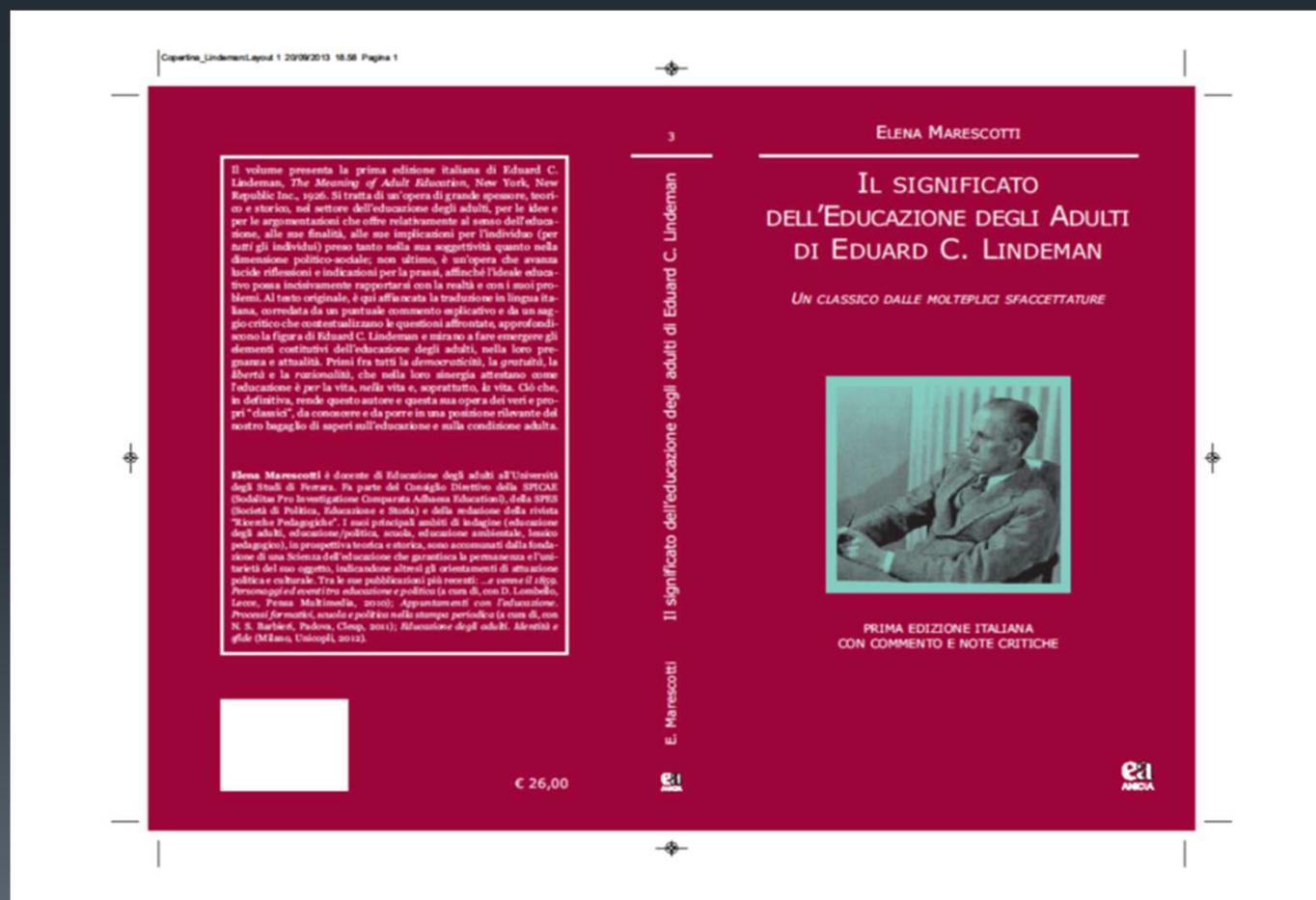
M. S. Knowles, *The Making of an Adult Educator*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers, 1989; tr. it. *La formazione degli adulti come autobiografia. Il percorso di un educatore tra esperienza e idee*, prefazione all'edizione italiana di Laura Formenti, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 1989

M. S. Knowles (1973), *The Adult Learner. A Neglected Species*, Houston, Gulf Publishing Company, 1990<sup>4</sup>; tr. it. *Quando l'adulto impara. Pedagogia e andragogia*, prefazione all'edizione italiana di Dante Bellamio, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1997

M. S. Knowles (1973), *The Adult Learner. The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, Burlington, Elsevier Inc., 2005<sup>6</sup>, con gli aggiornamenti di E. F. Holton III, Richard A. Swanson; tr. it. *Quando l'adulto impara. Andragogia e sviluppo della persona*, prefazione all'edizione italiana di Maurizio Castagna, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2008<sup>9</sup>

## Eduard C. Lindeman, *The Meaning of Adult Education*, New York, New Republic Inc., 1926

It is a "classic" highly known and still frequently quoted in America and, more generally, within English-speaking countries, but practically completely overlooked in Italy.



“Già si agita una nuova speranza. Da molte parti giunge l'appello a un nuovo tipo di educazione imperniata sul principio fondante che *l'educazione è vita* – non mera preparazione a una vita futura di tipo ignoto. Sono di conseguenza abbandonati tutti quei concetti statici di educazione che relegano il processo di apprendimento alla fase giovanile. L'intera vita è apprendimento, e in tale ottica l'educazione non può avere un termine. Questa nuova avventura si definisce *educazione degli adulti*: non perché sia limitata a questi, ma perché sono la maturità, l'età adulta a definirne i termini. Si tratta di un concetto inclusivo. Il fatto che i lavoratori manuali della Gran Bretagna e i contadini della Danimarca abbiano condotto i primi esperimenti da cui noi oggi traiamo ispirazione non implica affatto che l'educazione degli adulti sia destinata unicamente a tali classi. Con ogni probabilità nessuno più del laureato ha bisogno dell'educazione degli adulti, poiché è proprio costui ad avere le idee più dubbie sulla funzione dell'apprendimento.

In secondo luogo, l'educazione concepita come un processo i cui estremi coincidono con la vita stessa si basa su ideali *non professionali*. In un mondo di specialisti è inevitabile che ognuno impari a fare il proprio mestiere, e se una qualche forma di educazione può essere utile a questo scopo, e a quello ulteriore di aiutare il lavoratore a comprendere il significato del proprio lavoro, sarà necessariamente un'educazione di ordine superiore. Ma, a volerla definire in maniera più accurata, l'educazione degli adulti inizia proprio laddove finisce l'educazione professionale. Il suo scopo è dare significato alla vita nella sua interezza”.

Eduard C. Lindeman, *The Meaning of Adult Education*, New York, New Republic Inc., 1926, pp. 6-7

“A fresh hope is astir. From many quarters comes the call to a new kind of education with its initial assumption affirming that *education is life* — not a mere preparation for an unknown kind of future living. Consequently all static concepts of education which relegate the learning process to the period of youth are abandoned. The whole of life is learning, therefore education can have no endings. This new venture is called *adult education*—not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits. The concept is inclusive. The fact that manual workers of Great Britain and farmers of Denmark have conducted the initial experiments which now inspire us does not imply that adult education is designed solely for these classes. No one, probably, needs adult education so much as the college graduate for it is he who makes the most doubtful assumptions concerning the function of learning.

Secondly, education conceived as a process coterminous with life revolves about *non-vocational* ideals. In this world of specialists every one will of necessity learn to do his work, and if education of any variety can assist in this and in the further end of helping the worker to see the meaning of his labor, it will be education of a high order. But adult education more accurately defined begins where vocational education leaves off. Its purpose is to put meaning into the whole of life”