[Accepted version for publication]
Published source: Costa, Ana L., Vaz, Henrique, & Menezes, Isabel (2021). The activist craft: learning processes and outcomes of professional activism. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *71*(3), 211-231. doi:10.1080/15575330.2020.1866049
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0741713620988255

The Activist Craft: Learning Processes and Outcomes of Professional Activism

Ana Luísa Costa, Henrique Vaz, and Isabel Menezes

Abstract

Work as a place of activism is a vast field to be explored in adult education research, particularly within educational, social, and community intervention with people in situations of vulnerability. This qualitative study aims to unveil the richness of activists' learning processes and outcomes by reflecting on the pedagogy of professional activism, with professionals working in Portugal. Their sharing reveals a thematic influence and interdependence between the dimensions "How?" and "What?" of professional activism learning and the themes composing them—respectively, "political socialization" and "work experience"; and "critical, social and political consciousness," "sense of (in)justice and empathy," and "know-how to speak out." As professionals learn how to become activists, they also construct this praxis, and themselves as professionals, giving meaning and (re)defining their activist craft, through a learning-creative process.

Keywords: professional activism, educational/social/community intervention, adult education and learning, radical adult education, social movement learning

Introduction

Professional activism is widely recognized as a crucial piece of educational, social and community intervention, fostering political and social changes that expressly affect people in situations of vulnerability (Blenner et al., 2017; Weiss-Gal, 2016; Zaudereret al., 2008). It can emerge or be enhanced in the workplace, requiring engagement and continuous learning (Ollis, 2008). As such, "professional activism" is a process whereby individuals act in their work context and use their profession to achieve political and social change, particularly when dealing with vulnerability. In a multidisciplinary and multiprofessional perspective, it includes all types of political action linked to the profession, the work context and the population involved. Moreover, for the purposes of this study, the term "professional" refers to work and profession and not to expertise or proficiency, nor to a paid activity. In this sense, a "professional activist" is a worker (not an expert) paid to develop educational, social and community work (not necessarily activist work) who acts politically against social injustice.

Despite the growing interest in research on work as a place of activism, there is still a vast field to be explored, particularly within educational, social, and community intervention with people in situations of vulnerability (Freitas, 2010; Speight & Vera, 2008; Weiss-Gal, 2016), a context that can, in itself, stimulate this political involvement. Our interest is based on the theoretical contributions of critical approaches that view intervention as a potentially liberating pedagogical practice (Freire, 1967, 1975; hooks, 1994; Martín-Baró, 1986). Critical perspectives advocate a praxis committed to transformative social change, based on thought and reflection as catalysts for action (Freire, 1967, 1975, 1979; hooks, 1994; Ledwith, 2011; Martín-Baró, 1986; Montero, 2004; Nelson & Evans, 2014). The "critical" is, thus, generally characterized by ongoing reflexivity and resistance to oppression and by a focus on the role of power, its influence on people's quality of life, and the way it permeates discourse and action. As such, educational, social and community intervention involves a commitment to social justice and to the well-being of communities, in general, and of oppressed and vulnerable individuals and groups, in particular (Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Contrary to a "naive activism"—where action is devoid of reflection and

purpose—critical perspectives imply a reflexive praxis that would support an engaged and critically conscious professional activism (Freire, 1975; hooks, 1994; Ollis, 2012b). This interrelation between theory, reflection, and action enables activists to develop, adapt and recreate their practices, constituting the basis for an evolving pedagogy of activism (Ollis, 2012b).

Inspired by this conception of educational, social, and community intervention as "the craft of making politics by other means" (Menezes, 2007, p. 142), the goal of this article is to explore professional activism pedagogy: the processes through which this craft is learned, as well as its learning outcomes. An intervention as a praxis and educational place of resistance (hooks, 1994; Ledwith, 2011), which simultaneously focuses on changing the system and also on caring for the people who are victims of this system (Evans, 2005), implies, first and foremost, the conscientization of professionals regarding the domination structures that create and maintain vulnerability and oppressive social relations, as well as their understanding of activism countering this domination structures as an essential part of their professional role (Costa et al., 2021; Ledwith, 2011). This critical approach also presupposes a knowledge on how to intervene/educate that is democratic, based on a dialogue centered on people's stories, thus making their socially constructed identities visible, and that allows one to construct, with another person (or group), a reciprocal learning relationship (Freire, 1979; hooks, 1994; Ledwith, 2011), as well as to create "narratives of possibility of social transformation" (Ledwith, 2011, p. 99).

Therefore, political action alongside the oppressed should constitute a humanizing and libertarian pedagogical action, an action with the oppressed (Freire, 1979), in which the professional assumes the role of educator and learner, who also grows and becomes empowered by the process of encouraging people to view their world critically and to actively engage in the struggle for liberation (Freire, 1975; hooks, 1994; Ledwith, 2011).

Based on this critical framework, this article intends to address the following questions: how do professionals working in educational, social and community intervention with people in situations of vulnerability learn to be professional activists?

How and why does their conscientization/politicization process take place? What concrete knowledge do they acquire through practice?

Learning Activism "On the Job"

Learning at the workplace is generally presented in literature about adult education within two main perspectives, with a long history of scholarship and practice in this field: one technical professional, functional, focused on personal development and job skills, market based, mostly individualized and apolitical, characteristic of Human Resource Development; and other centered in consciousness-raising and activism, in developing critical awareness and social action (praxis), essentially collective and political, central for Labor Movements and unions activism (Salt et al., 2000).

Theoretically, our study is akin to the latter, critical, engaged, emancipatory or radical adult education, for envisioning educational, social, and community work as a political praxis, ideally committed to conscientization and transformative social change (Foley, 2001; Freire, 1967, 1979; hooks, 1994; Ledwith, 2011; Martín-Baró, 1986; Montero, 2004; Nelson & Evans, 2014), acknowledging the importance of political mobilization by professionals working with people in situations of vulnerability, as well as the urgency of assuming it as an integral and relevant part of their work (Greenslade et al., 2015; Weiss-Gal, 2016). Although, when we refer to the workplace as a site of activism learning and practice, we aren't speaking about workers' learning to collectively organize and act for changes in the workplace, for the defense of workers' interests (as in labor movement education). We are focused in the socio-civic–political activism learning of professionals working in educational, social and community intervention, for the defense of causes and against situations of injustice experienced by the people with whom they work (users, target audience), that are catalysts of many new social movements today (e.g., antiracism, gender equality, refugee rights).

Engagement with the political sphere relates to the idea of building a (professional) political identity, which implies "learning to be and become an activist" (Ollis, 2010, 2012a, p. 187). Although "identity" is scarcely found in literature on politicization, it is considered a crucial individual and collective process of becoming

politicized and activist. It reveals how one sees oneself in the world, in relation to others, and the possibilities, ideas, and practices it might generate (Curnow et al., 2019).

Although activism learning can be deliberately stimulated in academic contexts of formal education, it is mostly built in social action, through concrete (work) experiences, relationships, and informal learning processes—"as people live and work they continually learn" (Foley, 2001, p. 72). Thus, they learn as they act, and this learning is enhanced through their participation and socialization with other activists from/with whom they learn (Foley, 2001, p. 72; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ollis, 2010) and with the people with whom they work (Costa et al., 2021).

Therefore, literature calls for this sociocultural interpretation of learning, stating that activism that takes place in social action, in communitarian environments, and in the work context, allows a learning that is situated in practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ollis, 2011), unplanned and tacit, essentially informal, implied and implicit, and driven by a desire to change the world (Foley, 2001; Ollis, 2010). As such, the process involves a powerful apprenticeship on how to become an activist, which incorporates a significant identity change and creation (Drew, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ollis, 2010), personal construction and fulfilment, and social recognition (Dubar, 2013). Becoming politicized through activist experience implies an expansive learning and transformation, a comprehensive shift that changes and shapes activists' epistemologies, identities, practices and political philosophies—which "holds the potential to shift how theorists think about learning, politics and ideology" (Curnow et al., 2019, p. 746).

There is also growing debate about the embodied process of activism learning defending that, instead of being understood as a mere cognitive process, it must be holistically analyzed as a mind–body–emotion process, involving the person as a whole and implying a symbiotic relationship between cognition processes and affect, emotion and the body (Curnow et al., 2019; Drew, 2015; hooks, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ollis, 2008, 2010). As such, the whole person is central to the learning process, as activists create meaning and develop their knowledge and skills, through reason, emotions and the body (Ollis, 2010).

All these visions of learning and the conception of everyday life and the relational processes created in these contexts, as generators of a relevant part of the political learning we do in our lives, compel us to continue research about the pedagogy of activism. Work contexts emerge as "educational" contexts that (informally and nonformally) contribute to the process of personal self-construction and the construction of the world, and thus as privileged places to study the involvement with professional activism, its inherent learning processes and resulting knowledge. Therefore, aiming to contribute to literature on the field, particularly within critical/engaged/radical adult education and social movements learning scholarship, we are interested in exploring the learning potential of professional activist practices and contexts as significant sites and spaces of education, highlighting the peculiar multidisciplinary, multiprofessional and understudied character of this target population.

Methodology

This article reflects on the pedagogy of professional activism and is based on the findings of a qualitative and exploratory study which promoted reflexivity and sharing about the activist stance of a group of 12 professionals working in educational, social and community intervention with people in situations of vulnerability, who are recognized for their political work related to their profession.

Participants were six women and six men, White and between 34 and 75 years of age. They work in Portugal, mostly in urban contexts (Porto and Lisbon), in NGOs, not-for-profit and for-profit independent associations, schools, governmental institutions, universities and health institutions, on issues of inclusive education, poverty and social exclusion, racism and discrimination, gender equality, disability, HIV prevention, drugs and nightlife/harm reduction, right to housing and gentrification, prostitution, asylum and immigration.

It's relevant to mention that the educational, social and community intervention sector in Portugal is traditionally conservative and dominated by welfare and religious-

based intervention, more focused on providing services to people in need than in assuming an activist stance, and is in great measure financed by government support.

All participants, presented in Table 1, were purposely selected to reflect diverse disciplinary/professional fields and intervention contexts, and to ensure age and gender balance, through a snowball strategy via personal/professional contacts, participants' and other professionals' suggestions, and media. To guarantee anonymity, each participant is presented in this study by the initials described in Table 1.

Table 1. *Characterization of Participants*

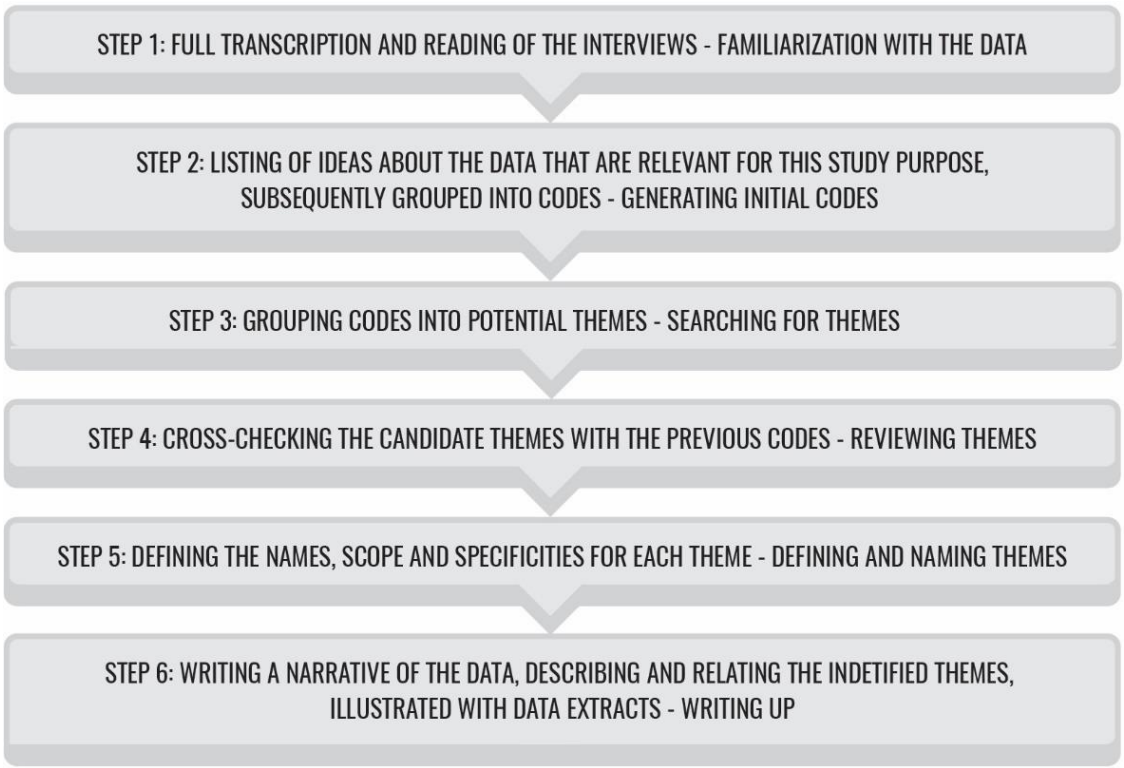
PARTICIPANT	AGE	GENDER	PROFESSIONAL AREAS	POSITION	INTERVENTION CONTEXT
V.A.	36	FEMALE	PSYCHOLOGY	PROJECT COORDINATOR OUTREACH WORKER RESEARCHER	HARM REDUCTION DRUGS AND NIGHTLIFE
F.I.	42	MALE	ARCHITECTURE	ARCHITECT	RIGHT TO HOUSING AND GENTRIFICATION
R.O.	66	MALE	EDUCATION	TEACHER NGO PRESIDENT GOVERNMENT ADVISOR	INCLUSICE EDUCATION
C.O.	41	FEMALE	EDUCATION	TEACHER	INCLUSICE EDUCATION
P.I.	52	MALE	SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIOLOGY	SOCIAL WORKER	POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION
O.R.	36	MALE	ARCHITECTURE	ARCHITECT RESEARCHER TEACHER	RIGHT TO HOUSING AND GENTRIFICATION
C.A.	63	FEMALE	MEDICINE	DOCTOR	HIV PREVENTION
F.O.	76	FEMALE	SOCIOLOGY	NGO DIRECTOR	PROSTITUTION
B.E.	34	MALE	HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY	PROJECT TECHNICIAN	ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION
M.O.	40	FEMALE	LAW	JURIST	ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION
S.I.	42	MALE	LAW	JURIST	RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION
M.A.	63	FEMALE	NURSING	TEACHER RESEARCHER	GENDER AND DISABILITY EQUALITY

To explore their own knowledge and experience about professional activism, we conducted semi-directive interviews (Amado, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2013). The first author conducted all the interviews, in Portuguese, starting by presenting the research goals and asking all participants to read and sign an informed consent form to participate. Inviting all participants to reflect and disclose, the interview was interactive, with questions being introduced freely in terms of order and way of questioning, following a flexible guiding script with main topics of interest for this study: the professional activism learning processes and outcomes, the intersection between work and political activism, motivation and difficulties, concrete political actions, perceived impact, and recommendations. The interviewer encouraged the participants to share concrete experiences, to better understand professional activism dynamics and processes—facilitating the disclosure of aspects that are more subjective or difficult to reveal/explain. In the end, all participants were asked to fill out an identification form with sociodemographic data (age, gender, academic qualifications, profession/work activity and positions).

The interviews, which lasted between 50 minutes and 2 hours and 15 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed *verbatim.* All transcripts were sent to the participants for review and approval.

Aiming to explore and characterize participants' experiences and perceptions about their professional activism learning, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis, because it allows to identify, interpret and describe patterned meaning and thematic interrelations in participants' narratives, through an active reflexive coding and theme development process, foregrounding researcher's subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Due to this study's exploratory nature, being interested in the way participants see their world (themselves included), and in how they describe and explain it (Gergen, 1985), we've followed na inductive analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013), in which the coding and themes are driven by the content of the data. The ideas in data that are relevant for the study purposes were coded and the similarity and overlap between codes allowed to identify potential patterns/themes. This analysis was developed manually by the first author, and then revised, discussed and concluded by all authors, comprising the following steps (Table 2):

Table 2. *Thematic Analysis Steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013)*



Analyzing the Data

The themes identified in participants' narratives about the pedagogy of professional activism are portrayed in the following thematic map (Figure 1), organized within the dimensions "How?"—learning processes—and "What?"—outcomes, and will be described further and illustrated with data extracts.

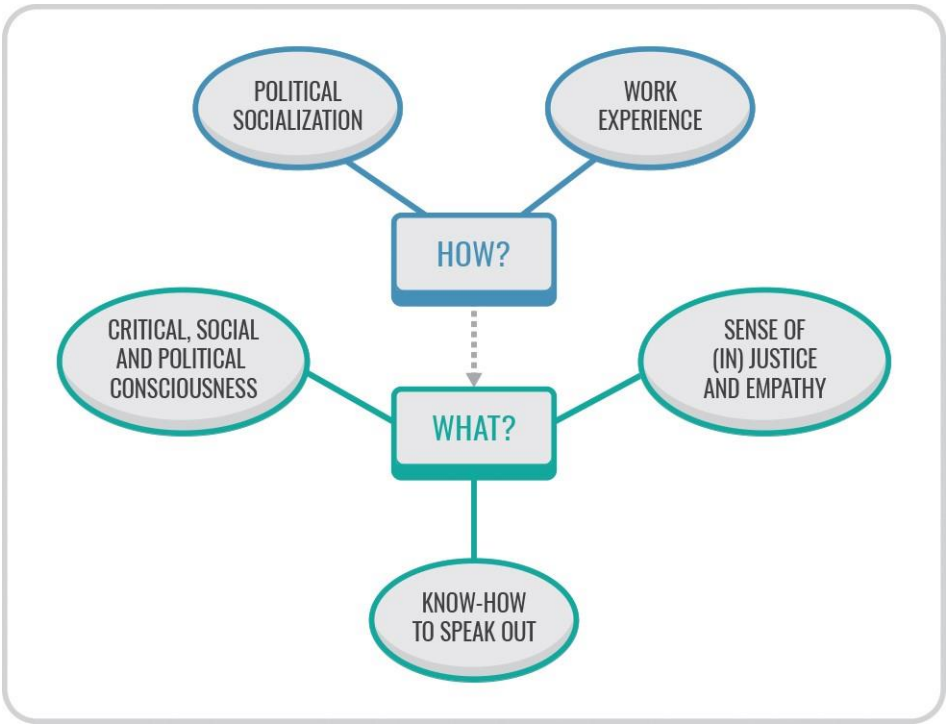


Figure 1. Thematic Map.

HOW do professionals learn to become professional activists?

We believe it is relevant to start by sharing that some participants emphasize a lack of investment from schools in promoting critical thinking and politicization, and even though they mention that higher education and professional training create opportunities to incite political consciousness and reflect about activism as a professional role, all participants attribute this critical/political input and insight mostly to their personal and professional relationships throughout life, to "political socialization," and to concrete "work experiences."

> I think that school has failed a lot in politicizing me, in giving me a more political view of the history of Portugal, the 25th of April1[1]. (. . .) you may be lucky enough to have someone (teacher) who somehow remembers to discuss something with you, but overall that's it. I think you get out of there knowing the contents (. . .) but then you don't know how to interpret the world. (. . .) The university gave me some tools for reflection and thinking, but it essentially had to do with the people I came across. (. . .) I didn't choose this job because I was already very politicized, I

[1] Also known as the Carnation Revolution. It was a peaceful revolution initiated by the military and supported by the people which, on the 25th of April 1974, overthrew the dictatorship that ruled Portugal for almost half a century and began the processes of democratization of Portuguese society.

> think it was the other way around. (V.A., 36 years old, Female, Psychology, Project Coordinator/Outreach Worker/Researcher, Drugs and Nightlife)

Political Socialization

All participants attribute great relevance to learning from/with others. They consider themselves lucky for having interacted with politicized people throughout their lives—family, friends, work colleagues, people with whom they work, members of groups and associations—who have greatly contributed to the development of their critical consciousness and to the transformation of their social, political and ideological view and positioning—a knowledge that became transversal to their personal and professional lives.

> I think I was lucky too, because my whole background as a person, since my childhood, was influenced by people who are very worried about and connected with social justice. Family, friends. Then I also had a very activist group of friends, very aware of what was going on. (...) It also built in me this insatiable will to change some things (and I believe I can still do it). (C.O., 41 years old, Female, Education, Teacher, Inclusive Education)

> I think you learn a lot from other people (. . .) It has a lot to do with the people I came across and it later transferred into my work and from my work into my personal life. (. . .) "I think it was essentially the people who taught me, not so much to do things, but to think them over. (V.A., 36 years old, Female, Psychology, Project Coordinator/Outreach Worker/Researcher, Drugs and Nightlife)

Being a politicization process, this learning sets the ground for professional activist behavior, by increasing participants' political interest and sensitivity, and promoting identification and engagement with this role. Moreover, it is a learning shaped in the social contexts in which participants lived, and by the contact, experience and participation with/in politicized circles.

> The truth is that, since I was very young, part of my socialization, not just political, socialization "tout court," took place in politicized circles. My father and mother are left-wing, and I often had semipolitical debates with them, from an early age. My family doesn't have a tradition of activism, but they have a tradition of political conscience, and I was very young when I developed this kind of interest and this kind of sensitivity. (B.E., 34 years old, Male, History and Sociology, Project Technician, Asylum and Immigration)

> It is evident that the overwhelming majority of people who work in this institution have obviously had a political and partisan culture for many years and, therefore, they have a large political conscience. (S.I., 42 years old, Male, Law, Jurist, Racism and Discrimination)

Work Experience

All participants present their work experience as a rich and privileged learning opportunity, particularly due to its politicization potential, which they define as lifechanging, thus reinforcing the meaning and purpose of this study.

> It was a very enriching professional period in my life, where I learned a lot. (. . .) I found out that, in some cases, going to see those people was not an obligation, but a privilege. (. . .) I met very interesting people. I've learned a lot. And especially, I've learned a lot about issues that, had I not met these people, I wouldn't have learned absolutely anything about. And that is very important to me. (C.A., 63 years old, Female, Medicine, Doctor, HIV Prevention)

> This work has helped me in all areas of my life, my entire life. It helped me to become politically and even ideologically aware. (. . .) I can say that my work in this institution has changed my life for the better, at a personal and professional level and at the intervention level. (F.O., 76 years old, Female, Sociology, NGO Director, Prostitution)

> I don't think I'm the most politicized person in the world, but I think I'm a much more politicized person now than I was a few years ago, and this area starts to be the one that interests me the most, in my job. (V.A., 36 years old, Female, Psychology, Project Coordinator/Outreach Worker/Researcher, Drugs and Nightlife)

Therefore, professional activism learning is seen by all participants as fundamentally happening through practical experience, by contacting with real life/work contexts, by seeing other activists at work, and through their personal involvement in concrete activist experiences. Working outside the office, doing outreach work, interacting with people in situations of vulnerability and knowing their life stories, was extremely relevant to most participants for their politicization and professional activism learning.

> (. . .) it was from this date onward, between working with people with disabilities and being the manager of the unit, that I began to feel the urge to never shut up and to put as much pressure as I can in favor of others, from all sides. (. . .) When you see this and think about people's rights, you see that, systematically, some take away the rights of others. I think this is the way we learn. We learn by doing a huge reflective effort on equality issues, day to day, and in any profession

> we have. Whether as a teacher, as a nurse, as a doctor, or as an architect (. . .). (M.A., 63 years old, Female, Nursing, Teacher/Researcher, Gender and Disability Equality)

> "How am I going to talk about things?" We were never deputies or anything. (. . .) It was quite "do it yourself," it was through trial-and-error, at the beginning. (F.I., 42 years old, Male, Architecture, Architect, Right to Housing and Gentrification)

> Watching others doing it. (. . .) To learn how to do activism, I had to go and see how they did it. I had to see, hear, talk and that's what I did. (. . .) Listening to the other side is very important. Getting out of the medical environment, consultation, internment, etc., and being with the patient on the other side allows you to hear certain things not heard inside the hospital and this is critical. (C.A., 63 years old, Female, Medicine, Doctor, HIV Prevention)

Furthermore, the proximity established in their relationships, with the people with whom they work, constitutes noteworthy learning opportunities, implying a strong degree of cognitive, relational and affective investment and gains.

> It was a very enriching professional period in my life, where I learned a lot. (. . .) people have extremely rich histories and the only way to know them is to be among them. (C.A., 63 years old, Female, Medicine, Doctor, HIV Prevention)

> And living with these populations also opens your eyes to other things. It takes you out of your bubble. (. . .) I think it opened my eyes. There are a lot of circumstances and a lot of opinions that I have because I've had the opportunity to see and deal with certain people (. . .). (V.A., 36 years old, Female, Psychology, Project Coordinator/Outreach Worker/Researcher, Drugs and Nightlife)

> That is why the relationship I've had with these women, over the years, has always been a very fruitful relationship for me and them, because we learned from each other. And this learning was profoundly enriching for me. I used to tell them "if it weren't for you, I couldn't talk about it. (. . .) What I know, I've learned from you." (F.O., 76 years old, Female, Sociology, NGO Director, Prostitution)

However, as this politically compromised vision of work is not unanimous, or even common, in the organizations and between professionals, participants' activism learning was not a smooth and conflict-free process. The political alienation and apolitical positioning of the educational, social, and community work sector in Portugal and its critical dependency of funders/official institutions, are cited as obstacles to a professional activist stance, which conflict with participants' integrity and ethics. Nevertheless, these tensions are also seen as opportunities for learning, as catalysts of

their consciousness about the importance of acting politically in their work toward social justice and about the need to have strong political and ideological convictions to guarantee a coherent, ethical, and compromised intervention.

> (. . .) I ended up going to a highly depoliticized professional world (. . .) You realize that you are alone at sea (. . .) then you end up reinforcing your political identity in that professional context for the simple fact that there is no one else to help you dilute your disposition. (. . .) I wasn't that politicized when I started doing that job, but by the end of the journey, I was already much more politicized. (B.E., 34 years old, Male, history and Sociology, Project Technician, Asylum and Immigration)

WHAT do professionals learn with professional activism?

Strongly related to the learning processes previously described, three main themes or learning outcomes were identified in the analysis, suggesting an answer to this question: critical, social, and political consciousness," "sense of (in)justice and empathy," and "know how to speak out."

Critical, Social and Political Consciousness

According to most participants, working in the field of educational, social, and community intervention with people in situations of vulnerability has a great potential to activate critical thinking about social injustices and enhance political consciousness—building up a sense of duty to fairness, motivating a learning toward activism, and reinforcing a compromise with this political dimension of their work.

> This work has helped me in all areas of my life, my entire life. It helped me to become politically and even ideologically aware. (. . .) I realized and integrated [because it is important to integrate] the social asymmetries, the existing injustices. I remember thinking, "We cannot compromise with a society that generates such situations, that passively accepts that people live in situations of human degradation and that gives no importance to human dignity." (. . .) And that made me more aware and conscientious. (F.O., 76 years old, Female, Sociology, NGO Director, Prostitution)

> [I've learned] to be alert to certain factors (. . .), draw attention to the social issues that surround us or where we are all inserted and that obviously matter. So I had the possibility and the privilege to hear the other side, which is something that doctors usually do not have (. . .) and books don't talk about these things. (C.A., 63 years old, Female, Medicine, Doctor, HIV Prevention)

This politicization process, according to participants, implies the development of professionals' historical, social, and political knowledge and awareness—a theoretical and political consciousness essential to understanding how society is organized and which strategies and tools can be used to transform it—which they consider to be lacking among professionals working in this field, and which would contribute to a more political vision of this work.

> For me, the perception that people have the right to a better life and that is why they must be accepted by Europe, is not enough (. . .) I also have to understand why these people are fleeing from the place where they come from, and understand why there are no conditions for them to develop their life projects. Thus, the speech focused solely on racism and xenophobia doesn't allow me to have this understanding. Therefore, the advantage that I got from this work was also to realize that I have to go further, I have to understand other social dynamics (. . .) As I get involved in things, I realize that racial discrimination or any kind of discrimination is not a problem in itself, it is a consequence of a bigger problem, that is the way society is organized (. . .) of the velocity that neoliberalism and capitalism also impose on social relations and dynamics, and therefore it is also a consequence of exploitation (. . .). (S.I., 42 years old, Male, Law, Jurist, Racism and Discrimination)

> Having people who work in an IPSS [private institution of social solidarity], in more socially oriented organizations, take stronger political positions, can be counted on one hand. (. . .) A problem that limits this type of work is that civil society NGOs in Portugal understand their role as apolitical. (B.E., 34 years, Male, History and Sociology, Project Technician, Asylum and Immigration)

Sense of (In)Justice and Empathy

Participants' discourse reveals that their learning process – strongly connected to their political socialization, work experiences and particularly with the proximal relationships established with people in vulnerable situations – caused and/or enhanced a common, accurate and intrinsic sense of (in) justice, and of their own privileged condition, compelling them to reflect about structural injustice and increasing their personal curiosity to learn more about the political dimension of their work and their commitment to it.

> (. . .) what motivates me is a sense of justice [. . .] And if I can do anything to mitigate these injustices, I'll do it. (. . .) I think somehow it all started by my tendency to ask "why?" and not

answer my own question with “because it is like that.” (B.E., 34 years old, Male, History and Sociology, Project Technician, Asylum and Immigration)

I was always very curious. Always. It was visceral for me, because I couldn’t stand to see people suffering because they were on a lower social level. (C.O., 41 years old, Female, Education, Teacher, Inclusive Education)

For my personal life, I think it brought me a lot. It brought me the notion of privilege (. . .) Sometimes you are so focused on your issues and feeling “oh my god, my life . . . ” and when you are more open and working with other people you get a sense of how privileged you are. (V.A., 36 years old, Female, Psychology, Project Coordinator/Outreach Worker/Researcher, Drugs and Nightlife)

Working in this field and experiencing professional activism also activated their empathetic ability, which foresees and allows a better understanding of each other, prejudice deconstruction, tolerance, active listening and the recognition of others’ relevant knowledge.

(. . .) I think I already had some empathic ability, but here I’ve developed a better reading of the human soul. (C.O., 41 years old, Female, Education, Teacher, Inclusive Education)

I learned by taking people’s side. In the end, this is learning, it is to put ourselves in another person’s shoes and also realize how we would feel if we had lived that situation. (. . .) These are stories of great violence, especially for those who had never heard of this situation, had not lived close to or far from people in this kind of situation. (F.O., 76 years old, Female, Sociology, NGO Director, Prostitution)

What I value the most is the ability to learn and remove prejudice. (O.R., 36 years old, Male, Architecture, Architect/Researcher/Teacher, Right to Housing and Gentrification)

I think it brought me more tolerance. I don't think I'm the most tolerant person in the world in some relationships, but I think I’m a lot more tolerant than I was, and I think it has a lot to do with my professional history and especially with the fact that it is linked to people who live in situations of great vulnerability, with whom I empathize. (V.A., 36 years old, Female, Psychology, Project Coordinator/Outreach Worker/Researcher, Drugs and Nightlife)

(. . .) I learned that (. . .) if there is a constant (. . .) in human existence, it is the need we all have for recognition. It’s not just political recognition, it’s phenomenological recognition, the idea that I’m looking at you and recognizing that you exist for me and I won’t interrupt you when you are talking, and I will try to hear what you are talking about. I may not understand everything you

> are telling me, but if I do not (. . .), I will ask you, because I am valuing what you are telling me. That was very important. It remains very important. (B.E., 34 years old, Male, history and Sociology, Project Technician, Asylum and Immigration)

Furthermore, participants reveal that sense of (in)justice and empathy are triggered by affection and emotional connection, grounded in relationships with people in situations of vulnerability, work colleagues and other relevant people. Affection is also highlighted as an essential and powerful tool for professional activism, for dialogue, for connecting people and for building confidence and compromise, to make things happen.

> More than the technical part, which I've learned a lot about, techniques and laws and conventions (. . .) [I've also learned] that connecting people is the only thing missing, we aren't missing anything else, affections are what is missing. (M.O., 40 years old, Female, Law, Jurist, Asylum and Immigration)

> We conducted a camp. I had a relationship there. There it is, what's my valuable card? A relationship. Affection. Care. (. . .) Affection is a powerful tool for intervention. (P.I., 52 years old, Male, Social Work and Sociology, Social Worker, Poverty and Social Exclusion)

> If we don't like people, it's not worth it to work with them (. . .), affection is a fundamental factor for change. (. . .) Team spirit is [also] fundamental, because the team helps, we help each other, we support each other. Because it is not an easy job, it is not. But it is a deeply rewarding one. (F.O., 76 years old, Female, Sociology, NGO Director, Prostitution)

Know How to Speak Out

Communication is a hot topic among professionals, with respect to professional activism and its learning outcomes. Concretely, they mention the insight of the need to communicate and the courage to do it—not just becoming aware of social injustices, but to expose them, to alert and present proposals to overcome them and sensitizing/politicizing others (e.g., people in situations of vulnerability, politicians, general public).

> Another thing I've been learning is that no one knows what's inside my head and if I want others to know it, I have to say it. (. . .) Political involvement has taught me to not shut up. I was much quieter. (. . .) I may not say it in the best way, but I have to say it (. . .) And this knowledge of how to communicate, based on a critical reflection about the cases, has been a great learning for me. At first, I used to see, shut up and think I couldn't say it. And now, over time, I can be sure that,

> even though I may not say it well, I'll still say it and something will happen. So the ability to communicate has helped me a lot. I've learned to see that when I talk to one person, 100 people or 1,000 people, I'm communicating an idea that is useful to society, and so, I can't help saying what I think, wherever I go. (M.A., 63 years old, Female, Nursing, Teacher/Researcher, Gender and Disability Equality)

> I stopped being afraid. Although I'm a mother and that reduces my audacity a lot (. . .) when you have a really powerful belief, you stop being afraid, you know? Because you know you're going to do something good (. . .) you're on the right side (. . .), and when you're really convinced about something, it becomes almost powerful and so I will do it [laughs]. (C.O., 41 years old, Female, Education, Teacher, Inclusive Education)

> (. . .) I am very insecure and I have always been very afraid of making mistakes, but I remember the feeling of "if I do more miles, if I talk to more people, if I talk more on the phone, maybe we get another house, maybe we get more." (M.O., 40 years old, Female, Law, Jurist, Asylum and Immigration)

Professionals also point out the aptitude to communicate—the efficient and creative strategies and channels (e.g., dialogue and debates, publications, protest initiatives, use of media and internet platforms, counterpropaganda materials, influence policy makers), the behaviors/ways (e.g., alone or collectively; being more or less comfortable, discrete, cordial, radical or legal; using speech, writing, silent and/or artistic actions) and the opportunities (e.g., the knowledge/feeling/perception needed to realize which is the right moment [not] to act).

> I think each person has their skills, for example, I am a person who speaks a lot, who doesn't care much about speaking or public speaking. (V.A., 36 years old, Female, Psychology, Project Coordinator/Outreach Worker/Researcher, Drugs and Nightlife)

> (. . .) there are things like being in debates and listening to someone with a rather xenophobic stance and calling that person out (. . .). (B.E., 34 years old, Male, History and Sociology, Project Technician, Asylum and Immigration)

> To bring these actors in and sit them at the same table (. . .) after that, miracles happen, because people listen to each other. (M.O., 40 years old, Female, Law, Jurist, Asylum and Immigration)

> Now there is this side that I need to mitigate, because there are some dialogues that are established in a more—not cordial—but a more restrained way, you know? (. . .) And that's part of our maturity, because . . . you don't always have to be a revolutionary and an activist. There

> are things you can say and do sweetly. (. . .) We have to work them [students] in a more elegant way. Because they are better heard if they are sweet and if they're better with themselves. (C.O., 41 years old, Female, Education, Teacher, Inclusive Education)

> Rosa Parks' idea when she, in the United States, in Montgomery, refused to leave the bench. If she had done that five years before, she would have been beaten and gone to jail. And when she did that at that moment, it had a national impact. And I think this issue is very important too, that we have this feeling, this perception, we have the eyes and the senses all open to realize which is the right moment. Do not lose the moment, do not lose the moment, because there are extraordinary things that are done, but they are out of time, they are late or because they are too early and this is very important. (R.O., 66 years old, Male, Education, Teacher/NGO President/Government Advisor, Inclusive Education)

Finally, they also highlight the ethics to communicate—most participants see their work as a contribution to sharing people's problems, needs and concerns, and are aware of the need to evaluate what should/can be communicated in order to preserve people's interests and anonymity, and to respect their place of speech. Some participants also show concern with the importance of being active listeners and attentive to one's own speech, which must be inclusive, unprejudiced and adapted to the person to whom one is speaking.

> I've participated in many television shows and then I had the feedback. I used to pass them on the street and they would call me saying "Don't say that (. . .) say that we feel undervalued, because emotional neediness is too deep." From that moment on (. . .) I started talking about devaluation (. . .) and this is what we have to be aware of, in order to be able to respond to them. (. . .) The affective need is deeper, the need is within them, while devaluation is outside. Do you understand? It's curious. (F.O., 76 years old, Female, Sociology, NGO Director, Prostitution)

> (. . .) there have been very few people who have said they are HIV-positive and who have revealed themselves. Therefore, there needs to be someone who can convey their concerns. It is not speaking on behalf of them, which is something else. But this is not an obvious thing. (C.A., 63 years old, Female, Medicine, Doctor, HIV Prevention)

Communication is an essential ability to implement political work properly and effectively, since it is always about the message or the warning they want to transmit to others and that must be heard and have impact, in order to be transformative.

We finish the sharing of findings with something that few participants mentioned, but which we believe is worth noting, which is their learning about the relevance of working collectively, for issues of solidarity, safety, and activism impact.

> I often tell my students that the duck that gets shot is the one who comes out of the flock. (. . .) [We should] look for people to help us reinforce our commitment, trying not to be alone. (. . .) There are many things that can help us: people, international organizations, international statements (. . .). (R.O., 66 years old, Male, Education, Teacher/NGO President/Government Advisor, Inclusive Education)

> I've learned to ask for help and never do anything alone, always do it as a team (. . .) some are better public speakers and those go ahead (. . .) always with respect for each other's roles and for what one can do. (M.O., 40 years old, Female, Law, Jurist, Asylum and Immigration)

Concluding Discussion

The richness of activists' learning processes and outcomes reinforces the need for it to gain prominence in contemporary adult education research (Ollis, 2008, 2010). To our knowledge, there is a lack of studies focusing on professional activism and its pedagogical character, particularly in educational, social and community intervention, and through a multidisciplinary and multiprofessional perspective, characteristic of this professional field. Based on a critical lens that sees educational, social, and community work as critically reflexive pedagogic practices of resistance (Freire, 1967, 1979; hooks, 1994; Ledwith, 2011; Martín-Baró, 1986; Montero, 2004; Nelson & Evans, 2014), this study makes a contribution by exploring, with a group of professionals working in Portugal, the processes through which they learn how to do professional activism and the learning outcomes resulting from this experience—reflecting about the transformations in the way they perceive and give meaning to their political role in the profession.

We start this reflection by presenting the meaning these professionals attribute to professional activism (how they appropriate, understand and define this role). The meanings, conceptions and experiences shared in the interviews demonstrate that participants envision professional activism as a praxis that promotes and is guided by a sense of (in)justice, which demands a positioning in defense of the people with whom

professionals work, leading to interventions oriented by/for a utopian ideal of transformation toward social justice (Costa et al., 2021).

Regarding professional activism pedagogy, a thematic influence and interdependence stands out between the dimensions “How?” and “What?” of professional activism learning and the themes that compose them—respectively, “political socialization and “work experience”; and “critical, social and political consciousness,” “sense of (in)justice and empathy” and “know-how to speak out.” Our findings reveal that opportunities to incite political consciousness and reflect about activism as a relevant professional role are mostly triggered by personal and professional relationships throughout life and by concrete work experiences. Without disregarding particular academic inputs, professionals’ core principles and values, historical, social, economic and political knowledge, critical thinking, as well as political and ideological positioning, result from this contact with politicized people and circles throughout their lives and from work experience.

The latter is especially valued by participants due to its politicization potential and to being a privileged learning opportunity, marked by political participation in real-life contexts and by interpersonal connections with people in situations of vulnerability, other activists or relevant people with whom professionals establish reciprocal relationships of learning (Freire, 1979; hooks, 1994; Ledwith, 2011), motivated and facilitated by affection and emotionality, which reinforce a sustained commitment to professional activism (Drew, 2015, Ollis, 2010). We underline the recurrently emphasized protagonism of the people in situations of vulnerability as promoters of conscientization and politicization, highlighting their role as educators (Freire, 1979; hooks, 1994; Ledwith, 2011). We must also underline the ethical conflicts and resistances felt by participants within apolitical organizations and in the relationship with less politicized professionals (Greenslade et al., 2015), that did not limit their criticism and even enhanced their ethical mandate to fight for fair policies adapted to the needs and demands of vulnerable populations. There are also unavoidable issues of power emerging in participants’ narratives, about the work to be done in the educational, social and community intervention sector with regard to professionals’ awareness of privilege and acknowledgment of places of speech (Ribeiro, 2019). Issues

that, alongside a mutual recognition, participation and expression (between professionals and the people with whom they work), are crucial to engaged pedagogical practices and holistic learning dynamics (hooks, 1994). These are really interesting themes that we aspire to further in future research, as well as the meanings and impact of professional activism to people in situations of vulnerability.

Our findings reveal that professional activism is built on the awareness of social injustice, through a critical, political and ideological consciousness, which is triggered and/or enhanced, among professionals, by their working experiences and relationships, moving their work field toward the political realm (Costa et al., 2021). As shown in other studies, this learning happens in action, in situ, informally and tacitly (Foley, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ollis, 2010, 2011), as a shared, holistic and embodied experience, where the whole person is central to the learning process (mind, body and emotions), implying cognitive, relational and affective investment and gains (Drew, 2015; Lave & Wenger,1991; Ollis, 2008, 2010).

Participants define this learning as lifechanging, for shaping their critical, social and political awareness, empathetic and communication abilities, their way of seeing and being in the world, their perceptions of duty to fairness and of personal capacities and possibilities to promote social change and, ultimately, for (re)defining their professional identity and practice (Curnow et al., 2019)—engaging them in active political participation, toward a utopian ideal of a more equitable and fair society (Freire, 1967, 1975, 1979; Ledwith, 2011; Martín-Baró, 1986; Montero, 2004; Nelson & Evans, 2014).

Therefore, this learning process culminates in the construction of a committed political role which is not neutral nor implements a “band-aid,” ameliorative kind of intervention, but a transformative one (Evans, 2005), that can be materialized in diverse activist practices (e.g., protest initiatives, conversations and debates, publications) and approaches—for example, more or less silent, “in the background, doing little things that are barely visible,” or rebellious, going “to the streets with flags in their hands” (M.O., 40 years old, Female, Law; Costa et al., 2021)—that we intend to further in future studies.

The vision of professional activism as a reflexive, engaged and critically conscious praxis, which enables activists to develop, adapt and recreate their practices (Freire, 1975; Ollis, 2012b), and of professional activism learning as a mind–body–emotion process (Drew, 2015; hooks, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ollis, 2008, 2010), essentially informal and situated in practice (Foley, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ollis, 2010, 2011), expansive and transformative (Curnow et al., 2019; Kluttz & Walter, 2018), is consistent with the findings of this study, which reveal that, as professionals politicize and learn how to become activists, they also construct this praxis, and even construct themselves as professionals, giving meaning to, and (re)defining, their activist craft and professional role, through a dynamic learning-creative process, bounded to each personal/professional experience, the influence of others involved (professionals, people with whom they work), and the particular geographical, historical, social and political context in and for which it happens. We hope this article also creates space for further discussions, reflections and (re)creations on the "pedagogy to change the world" (Ollis, 2010), contributing to its dissemination, acknowledgement and prominence in professional, academic and research discourse and practice.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank all the participants in the study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This work was supported by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) and by the European Social Fund, under the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCH) from Portugal 2020 Programme [grant no. PD/BD/135472/2017]; and by the Portuguese Government, through the FCT, under CIIE's multi-annual funding [grants no. UIDB/00167/2020 and UIDP/00167/2020].

References

Amado, J. (2014). *Manual de investigação qualitativa em educação* [Manual of qualitative research in education]. (2nd ed). Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra. https://doi.org/10.14195/978-989-26-0879-2

Blenner, S. R., Lang, C. M., & Prelip, M. L. (2017). Shifting the culture around public health advocacy: Training future public health professionals to be effective agents of change. *Health Promotion Practice*, *18*(6), 785–788. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839917726764

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage.

Costa, A. L., Vaz, H., & Menezes, I. (2021). Exploring the meanings of professional activism. *Community Development*. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2020.1866049

Curnow, J., Davis, A., & Asher, L. (2019). Politicization in process: Developing political concepts, practices, epistemologies, and identities through activist engagement. *American Educational Research Journal*, *56*(3), 716–752. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218804496

Drew, L. (2015). Embodied learning processes in activism. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, *27*(1), 83–101.

Dubar, C. (2013). A construção de si pela atividade de trabalho: A socialização profissional [The construction of self through work activity: The professional socialization]. *Cadernos de pesquisa*, *42*(146), 351–367. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0100-15742012000200003

Evans, S. D. (2005, December). *From amelioration to transformation in human services: Towards critical practice* [Doctoral dissertation]. Vanderbilt University. https://ir.vanderbilt.edu/handle/1803/14210

Foley, G. (2001). Radical adult education and learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *20*(1–2), 71–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370010008264

Freire, P. (1967). *Educação como prática da liberdade* [Education as a practice of freedom]. Editora Paz e Terra.

Freire, P. (1975). *Pedagogia do Oprimido* [Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Afrontamento.

Freire, P. (1979). *Conscientização: teoria e prática da libertação: uma introdução ao pensamento de Paulo Freire* [Conscientization: theory and practice of liberation: an introduction to Paulo Freire's thought]. Cortez & Morales.

Freitas, M. F. (2010). Community psychology as political education and awareness raising: Resistances and possibilities in everyday life-suggestion for a model of analysis. In E. Almeida Acosta (Ed.), *International community psychology: Community approaches to contemporary social problems* (Vol. 1, pp. 73–93). Universidad IberoAmericana Puebla.

Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist*, *40*(3), 266–275. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.40.3.266

Greenslade, L., McAuliffe, D., & Chenoweth, L. (2015). Social workers' experiences of covert workplace activism. *Australian Social Work*, *68*(4), 422–437. https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2014.940360

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.3366/para.1994.17.3.270

Kluttz, J., & Walter, P. (2018). Conceptualizing learning in the climate justice movement. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *68*(2), 91–107. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713617751043

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355

Ledwith, M. (2011). *Community development: A critical approach* (2nd ed.). Policy Press.

Martín-Baró, I. (1986). Hacia una psicología de la liberación [Towards a psychology of liberation]. *Boletín de Psicología*, *22*, 219–231. http://www.uca.edu.sv/deptos/psicolog/hacia.htm

Menezes, I. (2007). *Intervenção comunitária: Uma perspectiva psicológica [Community intervention: A psychological perspective]*. Porto, Portugal: Livpsic.

Montero, M. (2004). *Introducción a la Psicología Comunitaria: Desarrollo, conceptos y processos* [Introduction to Community Psychology: Development, concepts and processes]. Paidós.

Nelson, G., & Evans, S. D. (2014). Critical community psychology and qualitative research: A conversation. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *20*(2), 158–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413510873

Ollis, T. (2008). The "accidental activist": Learning, embodiment and action. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *48*(2), 316–335. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ809726.pdf

Ollis, T. (2010). The pedagogy of activism: Learning to change the world. *International Journal of Learning*, *17*(8), 239–249. https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/CGP/v17i08/47225

Ollis, T. (2011). Learning in social action: The informal and social learning dimensions of circumstantial and lifelong activists. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *51*(2), 248–268. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ951996.pdf

Ollis, T. (2012a). Informal and Social Learning. In T. Ollis (Ed.), *A critical pedagogy of embodied education: Learning to become an activist* (pp. 187–208). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137016447_8

Ollis, T. (2012b). Activism, reflection and Paulo Freire: An embodied pedagogy. In M. A.

Peters & T. Besley (Eds.), *Paulo Freire: The global legacy* (pp. 517–527). Peter Lang. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305327574_Activism_reflection_and_Paulo_Freire_-_an_embodied_pedagogy

Prilleltensky, I., & Fox, D. (1997). Introducing critical psychology: Values, assumptions, and the status quo. In D. Fox & I. Prilleltensky (Eds.), *Critical psychology: An introduction* (pp. 3–20). Sage. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4039-1462-0

Prilleltensky, I., & Nelson, G. (2002). *Doing psychology critically: Making a difference in diverse settings*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4039-1462-0

Ribeiro, D. (2019). *Lugar de fala* [Place of speech]. Pólen Livros.

Salt, B., Cervero, R. M., & Herod, A. (2000). Workers' education and neoliberal globalization: An adequate response to transnational corporations? *Adult Education Quarterly*, *51*(1), 9–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/07417130022087099

Speight, S. L., & Vera, E. M. (2008). Social justice and counseling psychology: A challenge to the profession. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Handbook of counseling psychology* (pp. 54–67). John Wiley.

Weiss-Gal, I. (2016). Social workers' policy engagement: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *26*(3), 285–298. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12239

Zauderer, C. R., Ballestas, H. C., Cardoza, M. P., Hood, P., & Neville, S. M. (2008). United we stand: Preparing nursing students for political activism. *Journal of the New York State Nurses' Association*, *39*(2), 4–7. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/24264441_United_we_stand_Preparing_nursing_students_for_political_activism