

GEORGE A. KOULAOUZIDES (ED.)

TRANSFORMING WORK-LIFE BALANCES

**Proceedings of the 2025 Research Retreat
Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education Network
European Society for Research on the Education of Adults
(18–20 June 2025, University of Malta)**

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The European Society for Research on the Education of Adults

<https://www.esrea.org>



ESREA is a European scientific society. It was established in 1991 to provide a European-wide forum for all researchers engaged in research on adult education and learning and to promote and disseminate theoretical and empirical research in the field. Since 1991, the landscape of adult education and learning has changed to include more diverse learning contexts at formal and informal levels. At the same

time there has been a policy push by the European Union, OECD, UNESCO, and national governments to promote a policy of lifelong learning. ESREA provides an important space for these changes and (re) definition of adult education and learning in relation to research, theory, policy, and practice to be reflected upon and discussed. This takes place at the triennial conference, network conferences and through the publication of books and a journal.

ESREA Research Networks

The major priority of ESREA is the encouragement of co-operation between active researchers in the form of thematic research networks which encourage inter-disciplinary research drawing on a broad range of the social sciences.

These research networks hold annual/biennial seminars and conferences for the exchange of research results and to encourage publications.

The current active ESREA networks are:

1. Access, Learning Careers, and Identities
2. Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning
3. Adult Educators, Trainers, and Their Professional Development

4. Between Global and Local: Adult Learning and Communities
5. Education and Learning of Older Adults
6. Gender and Adult Learning
7. History of Adult Education and Training in Europe
8. Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education
9. Life-history and Biography
10. Migration, Transnationalism, and Racisms
11. Policy Studies in Adult Education
12. Working Life and Learning
13. Spaces, Times, and the Rhythms of the Education of Adults and its Movements

ESREA Journal



RELA European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults

ESREA publishes a scientific open access journal entitled The European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA). All issues of the journal can be read at www.rela.ep.liu.se. You can also find more information about call for papers and submission procedures on its website.

The Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education Network (TEAE)

Facing crisis challenges us, but it also opens possibilities to learn, grow, and even transform. Crises such as climate change, racism, pandemics, the rise of extremism and populism, and the spread of fake news and misinformation call for rethinking how we know and live in the world—creating opportunities for emancipation. At the heart of the *Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education* network is the belief that adult learning can lead us forward through these crises, helping individuals and communities reimagine their futures.

Our mission is to foster international dialogue and research on transformative and emancipatory adult education, co-creating a vibrant community in Europe devoted to exploring how learning can promote personal, social, and global change. The network offers a meeting place where ideas, practices, and research converge to shape more just and inclusive societies.

We explore themes such as:

- Critical traditions of transformative and emancipatory adult education
- Theories and methods of transformative learning
- Links between theory and practice

Building on Jack Mezirow's framework of transformative learning (1978) and the work of the former *Transformative Processes in Learning and Education* network, we continue the tradition of research and collaboration through conferences and shared projects. The TEAE network emphasizes the emancipatory potential of adult education and seeks to bring together researchers, scholars, and practitioners worldwide. Guided by principles of co-creation, collaboration, openness, inclusion, diversity, and equity, we aim to strengthen the impact of transformative and emancipatory learning in adult education.

Laboratory of Biographical Learning and Transformative Adult Education Hellenic Open University



The Laboratory of Biographical Learning and Transformative Adult Education of the School of Humanities of the Hellenic Open University aims to conduct interdisciplinary qualitative research in areas related to the process of learning during adulthood, as well as the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs and activities regarding any type of formal, non-formal, or informal learning activity. The laboratory investigates biographies in the context of the dialectical relationship of learning and transformation-/modification of personality and worldview, through in-depth analysis and understanding of biography as unfolded by the persons themselves.

It also focuses on the biography of the Hellenic Open University, as socio-economic changes, the inflation of academic qualifications, and the shrinkage of the welfare state have had a profound impact on the university's orientation, as its undergraduate and graduate programs attract a diverse student body. In this context, the laboratory attempts to outline the profile of the institution's students as well as that of its graduates. e-mail: btlearnlab@eap.gr

THE THEME OF THE 2025 RESEARCH RETREAT

How do we navigate our work-life balance? What does the way we hold work and the way we hold life tell us about ourselves? What subjective value do we place on our jobs? One way to look at how we balance work and life is to think of it in terms of improvement and optimization. Another, deeper way to think about it is to question the distinction itself instead of optimizing it. Some scholars even argue against separating work and life altogether, viewing any divide as artificial. In academia—perhaps more than in other fields—we often conflate our identities with our jobs, the titles we hold, the positions we have earned, and the research we conduct. The questions we pursue in our work often reflect our own life experiences. In this context, the statement “I am my job” resonates strongly. Yet, it raises significant inquiries: Who are we beyond our professional roles? What constitutes our deeper sense of purpose?

We learn or don't learn to navigate our work-life balances throughout our careers, and at different times, we need to reassess this balance. What if we struggle? How can we move to a place of possibility from a place of difficulty? Every crisis offers moments of decisions to move beyond our current way of being in the world. We become aware that we are not trapped by one way of looking at the world or being in the world. Our struggle becomes a moment of emancipation. There is another, deeper layer to the question of how we can navigate our work-life balance, one that is tied to today's struggle. Morgan Housel articulates how this relationship has evolved; historically, factory workers could visibly see the results of their labor, and upon departing the workplace, their workdays concluded. But when our job is to think—and in academia to produce impactful research—we do not detach from work once we leave the office; our days don't end. Working in our heads, thinking through problems and research questions feels like work never ends. We can't just detach from our work once we leave the office because the tool, we would have to leave behind is our head, which never leaves us. Does work ever truly end? It might not always feel like that. How are we supposed to navigate

and manage a sustainable work-life balance when the line that separates both is so blurry?

- What is the struggle within your current research?
- How does your work reflect your experiences?
- How does your research reflect and connect to transformation and/or emancipation?
- How do you balance your work-life balance around your research?

Research has shown that having control over our time is key to happiness and that this very control has diminished. How can professionals cultivate the capacity to rest in a perpetually demanding environment? How can we disengage from work while maintaining productivity? Furthermore, how can we effectively assimilate and reflect upon our professional experiences, allowing for growth and potential transformation?

These questions created the framework for our TEAE network Research Retreat. In the retreat of the TEAE network, we gathered in formal and informal events to examine the aforementioned fundamental questions in an environment that promotes both scholarly exchange and time to reflect and engage. The objective was to rethink and enhance the manner in which we organize our research, our professional and personal lives, and foster connections within our community.

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**When work is not working.
Practicing radical vulnerability
to open up spaces for transformative
listening and collective kinship**

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ABSTRACT

Workplaces are complex environments that can vacillate between growth and adversity. Toxic environments erode well-being and resilience (Kesse, 2024). This experiential session invites participants to practice in the Transformative Learning Protocol (Anderson-Sathe et al., 2021, 2022) by engaging the participants in storytelling through reframing stories of work toxicity. The Transformative Listening Protocol (TLP) promotes reflective, authentic, and relational listening (Romano, Kramlich, et al., 2024) that aligns with Mezirow's (1991) view that transformative learning is rooted in critical reflection and new meaning-making. Through the facilitation in dyads and/or in small groups, participants explore their stories of workplace toxicity in order to open up spaces for people to experience radical vulnerability (Wright & Derreth, 2022) and holistic listening in a brave collective setting. This session allows participants to explore and experience kinship as they share their stories. The aim of the experiential session is to help people to reframe what they have perceived as a personal individual problem in terms of collective responsibilities and kinship in complex workplaces, where boundaries between work contexts and

personal domains are often indistinct (Watkins & Marsick, 2023). The focus is not on changing the workplace but on empowering individuals to revise and, where possible, transform their epistemological perspectives to respond to the toxicity, to remain healthy, and to maintain resilient “integrity” from what is happening at work. Our hypothesis is that this shift can be sustained through transformative listening and authentic engagement, fostering kinship and connection with others through restorative vulnerability and renewed forms of responsible agency.

Keywords: Transformative learning, Reflective listening, Radical vulnerability, Workplace toxicity

Introduction: the problem

In the intricate complexity of our professional lives, we navigate a multifaceted landscape characterized by both prosperous periods of growth and perilous challenges. Among these challenges, toxic workplace environments emerge as formidable obstacles, capable of undermining our well-being and eroding our resilience (Kesse, 2024). This experiential session will offer a facilitation guideline through the Transformative Listening Protocol (Anderson-Sathe et al., 2021, 2022) to engage participants in storytelling and reframe stories of work toxicity.

The Transformative Listening Protocol (TLP) is a methodological protocol that works as a scaffolding structure to foster practices of transformative listening. The purposes of the TLP are (a) to facilitate people’s inner understanding of their listening practices through a deep experience of listening and self-analytical exploration and (b) to enhance understanding of authentic and holistic listening with a desire for improvement and expansion of their listening capacity (Romano, Kramlich, et al., 2025). These align with Mezirow (1991), who stated that free and authentic adult participation in discourse is one way by which learners have access to effectively make and understand relevant arguments, engage in critical analysis, and reflect on assumptions.

Through the facilitation offered by the adoption of the TLP in dyads and/or in small groups, participants will elaborate on their personal stories of workplace toxicity and/or delegitimizing situations to open up spaces for people to experience radical vulnerability (Wright & Derreth, 2022) and affective connection in a brave collective setting.

Literature Review

The definition of “workplace toxicity” refers to negative and harmful conditions in a work environment where people systematically experience feelings of power abuse and individual disrespect. The literature suggests that the impact of workplace toxicity on personal life and career may be significant. It can trigger physical and emotional health problems, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (George, 2023). The causes of workplace toxicity can be found in three categories: leadership styles that are too hands-off or too authoritative, organizational structures that are too ambiguous or controlling, and lastly, negative interactions with other employees that include both gossip and bullying (Sulaeman et al., 2024).

An organization’s culture can contribute to its early demise and should be a priority for those in leadership. Results of a toxic work environment include stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction that quickly result in decreased engagement at work, poorer and slower outputs that lead to less overall profits, and sick employees (Anjum et al., 2018; Ismail & Owaida, 2023; Sulaeman et al., 2024). Toxic leadership is linked with an increase in employee burnout, silent quitting, individual disengagement, and billions of dollars are spent every year in the US to address the impact of toxic leadership and workplaces on employees (Koropets et al., 2020). This damage is often inevitable and irreparable and often impacts the employer by making them toxic as well. There is little evidence to support flourishing in the toxic workplace, as the employee sometimes assumes some of the characteristics of the toxic environment (Hausman & Minor, 2015; Rasool et al., 2021).

This paper explores the impact of kinship experienced by both telling and listening to stories of workplace challenges through the

Transformative Listening Protocol (TLP). This vulnerable act of telling challenges and being listened to could offer an antidote of support in an otherwise threatening environment. The concept of kinship was originally found in the field of anthropology, but today it is found in multiple fields and focuses on relating to one another (Bras & Van Tilburg, 2007; Furstenberg, 2020). Krawec (2022) has explored how kinship is a way to remember their humanity and that they belong to each other. Her work draws on indigenous practices and challenges people to learn and create kinship even in harmful circumstances. Finding kinship with a co-worker can give critical support to temporarily alleviate or mitigate the challenges of a toxic work environment (Wang & Tang, 2022). High-Quality-Connections theory states that close, positive connections at work can foster belonging and resilience (Dutton et al., 2025). For this paper, we propose that practicing embodied listening for mutual support and growing connection through sharing toxic dilemmas with the facilitation of the TLP can foster kinship.

The Transformative Listening Protocol

The Transformative Listening Protocol was created, tested, and developed by the Transformative Listening Collaborative, an international community of researchers who were recruited as volunteers to engage in the process of preparing an “International Day of Listening” for the International Transformative Learning Conference (ITLC 2018).

The current members of the Transformative Listening Collaborative include global scholars from all over the world: Victoria Marsick, Laurie Anderson-Sathe, Tes Cotter Zakrzewski, and Ed Cunliff from the USA; Anne-Liisa Longmore from Canada; Janette Brunstein from Brazil; Deborah J. Kramlich from Thailand; and Alessandra Romano from Italy. In preparation for ITLC 2018, we met virtually every month for the 18 months leading up to the conference (Anderson-Sathe et al., 2021). Deep listening was modeled and practiced during each of our meetings. The embodied listening techniques employed in this study entailed the initiation of each meeting with a grounding activity (Romano et al., 2025).

As the Transformative Listening Collaborative, we co-created the Transformative Listening Protocol to increase awareness of the importance of embodied listening as a transformative component of learning through story (Anderson-Sathe et al., 2021; Romano et al., 2025). The Transformative Listening Protocol was originally developed on three cards for the International Transformative Learning Conference 2018. It was tested in the first round of the iterative process of prototyping and testing. After the first round of prototype testing, it was reduced to a one-page paper with a clear step-by-step set of prompts to follow (ibidem). The Transformative Listening Protocol is now a facilitation guide for embodied listening to be used in dyads and/or in groups.

The purposes of the TLP are (a) to facilitate people's inner understanding of their listening practices through a deep experience of listening and self-analytical exploration and (b) to enhance understanding of authentic and holistic listening with a desire for improvement and expansion of their listening capacity. The conditions for implementing the use of the TLP included fostering mutuality, respect, care, and trust among participants and encouraging open and genuinely frank dialogue. As the Transformative Listening Collaborative, we believe this aligns with Mezirow (1991), who stated that free and authentic adult participation in discourse is one way by which learners have access to effectively make and understand relevant arguments, engage in critical analysis, and reflect on assumptions. Through our experiential session, we would like to contribute to the current debate on expanding transformative learning theory by exploring how listening practices can enhance the process of cultivating embodied and affective connection.

Findings from previous studies suggest that engaging with the TLP provided opportunities to reflect-on-action by retelling a story and reflect-in-action as the teller and listener(s) follow the TLP process (Schon, 1983; Anand et al., 2020). The TLP appears to function as a helpful tool in both facilitating a process to improve listening and in creating spaces of liminal safety and a holistic sense of interconnectedness that allows for enhanced learning, connection, compassion, and responsibility for the other (Anderson-Sathe et al., 2022).

While Mezirow laid the groundwork for the first variant of transformative learning, which was primarily cognitive-rationalist and focused on micro-level, individual change (Lange, 2019, p. 3), as transformative learning evolved, it embraced a more holistic perspective, incorporating emotions, context, relationships, and spirituality (Baumgartner, 2012, p. 110).

In this regard, the Transformative Listening Protocol sets out the process for enhancing decentering from egocentrism to assume others' perspectives. Practicing transformative listening through the TLP opened individuals' minds to different perspectives by deeply listening to another's point of view through multiple senses to understand their lived experience. By engaging in embodied listening with others, learners can explore new ways of connecting to each other and consequently engage with novel perspectives (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168–169; Anderson-Sathe et al., 2021, 2022). It is important to emphasize that practicing listening through the TLP opens the door to the opportunity that dyadic feedback in a safe space to speak authentically and be heard authentically supports perspective-taking by the storyteller in the context of being deeply heard and getting authentic engagement from each other.

This practice is even more important when we practice transformative learning research in specific conditions to navigate and support learning in complex workplaces. These workplaces are characterized by material and relational power domains, highly polarizing and blurring working conditions, and a merging of personal and professional identities (Housman & Minor, 2015; Rasool et al., 2021).

Description of the experiential session

The aim of the experiential session is to help people connect with others and reframe what they have perceived as an individual problem in terms of collective responsibilities and kinship in complex workplaces, where boundaries between work contexts and personal domains are often indistinct (Watkins & Marsick, 2023). If we cannot change our workplace, how can we change ourselves and our perspectives so that we can escape the toxicity? How can we promote a paradigm shift

to discover new forms of collective resiliency and recreate alternative trajectories of agentic engagement with our workplaces? Or how we can connect deeply with someone who shares the collective challenge of the toxic workplace, and this connection or kinship to another person could provide the needed emotional support to persevere.

The listening protocol process: We invite the participants of the TEAE retreat to share experiences of working in a toxic environment in dyads to practice transformative listening. This activity allows participants to grow in connection and kinship with someone who has experienced similar struggles while empowering personal transformation by both listening and sharing ways to preserve authenticity without allowing the toxicity to permeate one's integrity.

- Introduction of the Protocol (10 Minutes):
 - Participants are led in a grounding activity.
 - Participants receive a copy of the protocol as well as informed consent.
 - The facilitators explain the steps of the protocol.
- Using the Protocol in Dyads (20 Minutes)
 - Participants are placed in dyads and asked to respond to this prompt: "Share an experience where you (or someone you know) worked in a toxic environment and how you (or she/he) managed to keep your integrity and stay true to yourself." People are invited to remove any detail that could help identify the context of the story.
 - Storyteller 1 shares a story for 3-5 minutes while the other participant is the story listener. The story listener practices authentic listening according to the prompts in the protocol.
 - Now the roles are reversed, and the story listener becomes the storyteller.
- Reflective Discussion about using Protocol (15 minutes)
 - Participants are asked to reflect on the experience of embodied listening as well as hearing stories of overcoming toxic work environments. This includes:

- What did they notice in their body as the story listener?
- What did they notice as the storyteller through the experiences of someone fully listening to them?
- How did hearing stories of perseverance and integrity inform their personal story?
- How and where did this shared activity help form shared connection and kinship?
- How did the protocol expand and inform their listening experience?
- How can this practice be used to support one another in challenging work environments?

We hope that this practice of embodied listening in dyads becomes more integrated in the workplace by fostering deeper connection and understanding among colleagues.

Emerging outcomes

Through the experience of listening and being listened to, we would like to facilitate the exploration of embodied relational modalities grounded in affective kinship, with a view to engaging with workplace dynamics. We deliberately refer to kinship because “kinship employee engagement serves as a mediating variable because individuals in an organization develop a certain psychological attachment, which fosters a sense of belonging to their respective organizations” (Faisal, 2022, p. 32).

The focus is not on changing the workplace but on empowering individuals to revise and, where possible, transform their epistemological perspectives to respond to the toxicity, to remain healthy, and to maintain resilient “integrity” from what is happening at work. This reframing process is not just cognitive; it is also grounded in the concept of embodied interconnectedness—an affective and relational state that plays a pivotal role in surviving and thriving in toxic workplaces.

Our hypothesis asserts that this shift in premises can be sustained through transformative listening and authentic engagement in spaces for connection with others, while practicing restorative vulnerability and rediscovering alternative forms of responsible agency.

Lange (2018) further asserts that our understanding of transformative learning remains influenced by problematic modernist ideas of rationalism, reductionism, empiricism, mechanism, dualism, and causality (Lange, 2018, p. 283). She suggests revitalizing transformative learning through insights from the emerging ontology and epistemology of relationality. According to Lange (2018), the relational turn challenges the scholarship on transformative learning, shifting the locus from the individual to the dynamics of the whole, drawing attention to the nested, entangled systems in which individuals are embedded. These systems include, e.g., spaces, humans and nonhuman relations, professional and familial ties, larger societal structures, as well as affective connections (Lange, 2018, p. 291). Her attention to materialistic and embedded relationships echoed Barad's concept of interconnectedness, which we find particularly relevant to name the intra-acting embodied perception of being interconnected with participants' experience through the protocol. These relationships go beyond mere friendship, involving strong emotional bonds, a sense of belonging, and a long-term commitment, similar to family connections (Pariyanti, 2022, p. 32; 2025).

This affective embodied ontology redefines transformative learning as a process embedded within complex, interconnected systems (Koskinen, 2024). It shifts the focus away from isolated, individual perspective transformation and embraces extrarational, emotional, and holistic learning. Recognizing the broader web of interconnectedness shaping participants' listening can encourage a renewed sense of collective responsibility and awareness of our agency to build bridges for collective kinship. Another shift that can happen could come from the "telling" and the "being heard" for both participants. Sometimes the act of verbalizing injustice or being traumatized is part of the healing process. Having someone deeply listen to your story and hear your struggles can be powerful and help to mitigate the impact of a toxic work environment.

Lastly, sharing a common story of workplace trauma with someone could potentially bring about a deeper connection or shared kinship with them. People who feel a kinship bond, a connection without blood or marriage ties, tend to feel more recognized, more satisfied, and more loyal, often viewing the organization as their home. This leads to higher engagement and a higher perception of collective agency and commitment (Eva et al., 2019; Richbell et al., 2010).

Our hope is that this experience will inspire communities to make Transformative Listening a common practice, expanding individual and group capacity to make meaning and leverage that meaning to co-create conditions for collective consciousness—also in highly competitive workplaces, such as the academic ones—and transformation based on authentic listening, belonging, and affective kinship.

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The Contributors of the Proceedings

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Dr. Andrea Bosco is a distinguished scholar in the field of psychology and psychometrics. He holds a Ph.D. in Psychology, with his research focusing on spatial mental representations and individual differences in spatial orientation. A full professor at the University of Bari “Aldo Moro,” Professor Bosco has made significant contributions to the understanding of spatial cognition, memory, and topographical disorientation, particularly in the context of aging and neurological disorders. His work also extends to the application of psychometric models to analyze human behavior. He has an extensive publication record and is a recognized expert in peer review for leading psychology journals.

Dr. Athina Charissi is a Tutor-Counsellor at the Hellenic Open University (HOU) and a Greek Literature Teacher. She holds a master’s and PhD in adult education, focusing on critical and emancipatory learning and teachers’ growth and transformation in diverse learning contexts. She is a Certified Adult Educator and Postdoctoral Researcher at HOU’s Biographical Learning & Transformative Adult Education Lab. Her research interests include transformative learning, critical reflection, educational (auto)biography, and the use of biographical

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Dr. Janet Ferguson is a Bermuda-based scholar-practitioner whose work explores embodied cognition, transformative adult learning, and sensory storywork. A contributor to the AEGIS Teachers College program, she integrates image theater and somatic inquiry in adult learning contexts. She is a certified Guided Autobiographical Writing instructor, co-facilitator with StoryCenter (USA), and Trustee at the National Museum of Bermuda. Her current research examines radical feedback, museum-based writing pedagogy, and body-centered narrative practice. Across academic and community settings, she engages story and the body as twin sites of care, imagination, and meaning-making.

Mr. Gustav Fridolin is a doctoral candidate at the University of Gothenburg, with a focus on learners. He is also an adult educator at Stockholm City Mission Folk High School. He has a particular interest in learners' perceptions of their educational pathways and the teaching methods used in folk high schools. Gustav has a background in politics and served as Sweden's Minister of Education from 2014 to 2019. He is a member of the Executive Board of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA).

Dr. Irene Gianceselli is a Research Assistant in Psychometrics at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Faculty of Education, and holds a Ph.D. in Human Relations Sciences, with a specialization in Psychology, from the University of Bari "Aldo Moro." Her research integrates psychometrics, pedagogy, and performing arts, with a focus on inclusive education, metacognitive training, and transformative learning. She has designed and led funded projects on gender equality, well-being, and the use of performing arts as educational tools. Author of several monographs and scientific articles, she has presented her work at international conferences and is an active member of international research networks in psychology and education.

Mr. Giovanni Gottardo is a doctoral candidate in Learning and Innovation in Social and Work Contexts at the Department of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences, *University of Siena*. He is a theatre educator and conducts workshops where he uses theatrical performance methods for educational purposes. His research interests focus on transformative learning and the possibilities offered by embodied education.

Dr. Maria Kagiavi is an educator and certified adult trainer. She holds a master's and PhD in Adult Education from the Hellenic Open University, specializing in Transformative Learning through aesthetic experience. She has taught in secondary education since 1987 and in adult education since 2004, mainly in Second Chance Schools. She has trained educators, coordinated experiential workshops, and collaborated with universities and organizations in Greece and Europe. Her research, publications, and conference contributions focus on the use of art as a pedagogical tool for critical reflection.

Dr. Alexis Kokkos is Emeritus Professor of Adult Education at the Hellenic Open University. He played a key role in establishing Popular Education in Greece and was among the founders of the Hellenic Open University. He has led major national initiatives, including serving as scientific director of the program for Training the Educators of Professional Training. Currently chairperson of the Hellenic Adult Education Association and editor-in-chief of *ADULT EDUCATION Critical Issues*, he is internationally recognized for his contributions to transformative learning. His books and articles have been published by leading publishers and journals, shaping theory and practice in adult education worldwide.

Dr. Deborah Kramlich teaches English at a German K–12 school in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and lectures for universities in Asia and Europe. She serves as Director of Education for Families in Global Transition (FIGT) and provides training, consulting, and coaching for schools and educators worldwide. Her research explores transformative learning as a catalyst for deeper cognitive and emotional engagement in language acquisition, cultural humility as a framework for cross-cultural

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Dr. Konstantinos D. Mantzanas earned his first Ph.D. in Theology (2002) and his second in Adult Education (2024). He also holds two M.Sc. degrees (1998, 2007) and two B.A. degrees (1991, 2023) in Theology (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) and European Culture (Hellenic Open University). He is currently serving as Adjunct Academic Staff at the Hellenic Open University, in the field of Philosophy and Literature. His research explores the foundations and conditions of dialectical inquiry, with particular attention to its relevance not only in theology but also in philosophy.

Dr. Georgia Mega is a tutor at the Hellenic Open University and a Primary Years Programme (PYP) teacher at Athens College Elementary School. She holds a master's degree in Pedagogy, with a focus on research methodology, statistics, and comparative education. She also holds a PhD in Critical Thinking through the Arts. Her scientific interests center on the use of the arts to cultivate critical and creative thinking. She has extensive experience as a teacher, trainer, instructor, coordinator, and author. Her recent research focuses on the role of street art in the learning process and its potential to foster critical thinking.

Dr. Alessandra Romano is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences at the University of Siena. In both teaching and research, Prof. Romano's focus is in generating conditions for adults, groups and teams to learn, grow and develop skillful means for collaborative inquiry and organizational change. She has a particular strand of research on intersectional approaches to transformative learning, inclusive research methods, disability management and inclusive leadership approaches.

Dr. Sara Rossi is a pedagogist and independent professional who collaborates with Italian agencies specializing in professional training. With more than a decade of experience as an educator and pedagogical coordinator for children aged 0–6, she has developed extensive

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Dr. Charru Sharma, (Ph.D. in Psychology), is a distinguished professor at the University of Delhi with over two decades of teaching and research experience. A Fulbright–Nehru Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, she has gained international recognition for her work at the intersection of psychology, education, and the arts. Her research highlights the transformative role of creative drama in fostering children’s social and cognitive development. As a consultant, theater facilitator, and prolific author, she integrates mindfulness, compassion, and creativity into learning. Through her global engagements and publications, Dr. Sharma continues to inspire innovation in holistic education.

Dr. Dagmar Spain is a dance educator, choreographer, and interdisciplinary artist collaborating with filmmakers, visual artists, and writers worldwide. She teaches at University of New York in Prague, Czech Republic (*The Power of Words*), and DanceWorks Berlin, Germany (*Applied Learning*), and previously developed programs at the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library, Iowa, focused on embodied democracy. Specializing in interactive dance integrating film, theater, and literature, she leads experiential workshops on the healing power of embodied expression at institutions including Michigan State University (2022), Hellenic Open University (2023), University of Siena (2024), and University of Malta (2025). She holds a BFA, MFA, and EdD in Dance Education (Columbia University, 2024) and lives in Berlin, Germany.

Dr. Thomaitsa Theodorakopoulou pursued her studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Athens. She holds two master’s

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Dr. José M. Tirado is an adjunct professor at the University of Iceland’s International Studies in Education program where he teaches courses in academic writing, pedagogy, development and self, and Buddhism. He is an active member of the worldwide Engaged Buddhism movement, bringing together years of varied life experience as a former union president at Warner Bros. Pictures, president of the Latino Writers Group of screenwriters, hospital chaplain, and meditation teacher. His poetry, articles on politics, Buddhism, and current affairs have been published in *CounterPunch*, *The International Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, *Levekunst: Art of Living*, *Lion’s Roar*, *Buddhadharma*, and others.

George A. Koulaouzides studied applied mathematics, adult education, and counselling. He is an **Associate Professor of Methodology of Adult Education** at the **Hellenic Open University (HOU)**, where he also serves as **Director of the Master of Arts in Adult Education**. In addition, he is the **Director of the Centre for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning** and the **Laboratory of Biographical Learning and Transformative Adult Education** at HOU.

He has designed the widely recognized, accredited training programme for instructors of the National Centre for Public Administration in Greece and possesses extensive experience in the training of trainers. George is widely regarded as a key figure in advancing the internationalization of the Greek adult education community. His research interests include adult learning, transformative learning, educational biography, and critical reflection. He has translated eight books in the fields of adult education and qualitative research, and he has edited academic journals as well as several textbooks. His published work includes more than 100 papers in journals, edited volumes, and conference proceedings. In 2019, he was inducted into the **International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame**.

What if the balance between work and life isn't something to be found—but something to be reimagined?

In academia and other spaces of adult education practice, the boundaries between who we are and what we do are often blurred. Our work shapes our identities, our days, and even our sense of purpose. Yet, beneath the surface of our research lies a more personal story—one of struggle, reflection, and transformation.

This collection of papers, presented at the Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education Network Research Retreat (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults), gathers voices from across disciplines to explore what it means to live and work meaningfully in a world that rarely pauses. Together, these contributions ask: How do we make sense of our professional lives when the line between thinking and being never fully fades? How do moments of difficulty open the door to growth, renewal, or even emancipation?

Blending academic insight with personal reflection, the volume offers perspectives—windows into how scholars, researchers and practitioners navigate the intimate connection between research and life.

Perhaps balance isn't a destination, but an authentic dialogue—a continuous conversation between the work we do and the selves we are becoming.