# Adult education and the wasteland: reflections on vulnerability – between the commodification of skills and the value of informal learning.

*But at my back in a cold blast I hear*

*The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.*

T.S. Eliot : *The Wasteland*

In his masterpiece, *The Wasteland*, the poet T.S. Eliot reflects on the vision of desolation and death in the lands of the Fisher King, an emblematic figure of vulnerability in the Arthurian legends. Vulnerability is derived from the Latin verb *vulnerare*, to wound, and as is often thought of as the counterpart to resilience. In the poem, the king is wounded in the legs and groin, and can no longer look after his kingdom, which has been reduced to a wasteland. He can only sit by the water’s edge and fish near his castle.

The wasteland is not just a myth. It exists, and is full of vulnerable people, wounded physically, psychologically, socially and economically. They are vulnerable due to the effects of the different forms of exclusion that are the consequence of the neoliberal catastrophe of the new economic order. Vulnerable, but, we believe, *capable*. The educational corollary of the economy of capital, *the new educational order* (Field, 2006), imposes the acquisition of skills necessary for the functioning of the labour market through a system of reification and merchandising of knowledge and know-how , exhorting the most vulnerable to take part in a headlong pursuit of skills for life and work that risk distancing them from their own needs and depriving them of any possibility of *making sense* of their lives. Individuals are vulnerable, groups and communities as well, but there are perhaps also vulnerable institutions, spaces of vulnerability. Universities and the research community must also ask questions of their role in this new order, and resist the pressure to contribute to a human capital-based model of adult education.

The commodification of literacy, contributing as it does to the justification of inequality (Atkinson, 2009), is underpinned by a series of international comparative studies piloted by the OECD (IALS, ALL, PIAAC). Based on standardised levels of competencies, the studies present a highly normalised view of skills, a deficit model of learning and education, stigmatising and chiding those who do not conform to these norms. In some instances (CIFC/Fédération Lire and Ecrire, 2016) marketing campaigns aimed at selling these ‘products’ to ‘deficient’ adults have resulted.

In this paper, we will explore the *wasteland*, in order to identify nor only sources of hope, but real examples of how the hegemony of the single narrative is being resisted, other tales being told. Innovation, creativity, the realisation of capability in the context of informal, often peripheral learning situations, often linked to social movements and community activism. Drawing on the social practice model of literacy (Street, Barton, Barton & Hamilton), the participative democratic activities identified in the works of Schugurensky and the concept of societal competencies (Negt, Zeuner) we will show the rich potential for learning individual an collective skills and knowledge through community activity, volunteering and social movements and the importance of recognising the status and value of informal learning.