Adult Learning and la Recherche Féminine: Reading Resilience and Hélène Cixous
Elizabeth Chapman Hoult
Palgrave Macmillian (2012)
Review by David Mathew

‘Finding a place in which the dead can speak is a central concern of this work.’

It is fair to say that very few of the books that we receive for review contain many sentences like this. Then again, not many books about pedagogy or education use words like ‘Ecdysis’ as chapter headings either, or contain sections entitled ‘The Risks Involved in Dancing with Snakes’ or detailed analyses of the work of playwright David Mamet. In fact, this is one of the most original and entertaining books I have ever read. So impressive and thought-provoking is it that the space allotted for this review could easily be taken up by a consideration of the first chapter alone. Such is the quality of the writing that the temptation is to quote well-chosen phrases in the hope of convincing other people of one’s opinion.

This is a book about adult learners who persevere against difficult odds. It is ‘an attempt to read resilient learning through texts not normally included in educational research studies – myth, poetry, drama, and autobiography’ – such as Educating Rita or The Winter’s Tale. By itself this would seem interesting and ambitious, but the author goes one step further by introducing a lens through which to view the whole proceedings: this lens is the work of Hélène Cixous, whose writings provided the author with ‘a theoretical basis from which to challenge the central pessimism of Bourdieu’s theory and the limitations of applying Derrida’s philosophical language to real-life learners.’ The author adds: ‘It has also enabled me to think much more deeply about the connections between reading, writing, and survival.’

How often, I wonder, do we consider our learners as survivors? We can usually think of a specific example of someone who has made the pedagogic journey and refused to give up, even when giving up was what most of us would do in the same circumstances. But survivors? While the book’s title might lead a reader into an (incorrect) assumption that the book will be a feminist or even post-feminist deconstruction of academe (or of pedagogy), there are even more complicated readings of resilience offered up; and as a book to revisit, it will make you think and it will make you humble. It might even make you grateful; it certainly made me feel grateful – happy that I travelled on when I was tempted to stop.

I hope I can be forgiven the inclusion of such an autobiographical gobbet. I submit that it would be difficult not to think about your own learning and your learners as you read Elizabeth Chapman Hoult’s words. Adult Learning and la Recherche Féminine is a rare discovery. It isn’t often that a book impresses me as much as this one did, and I hereby salute the author’s acuity and skill.

(Elizabeth Chapman Hoult has written an article for the JPD. It appears next in this issue. – Eds.)