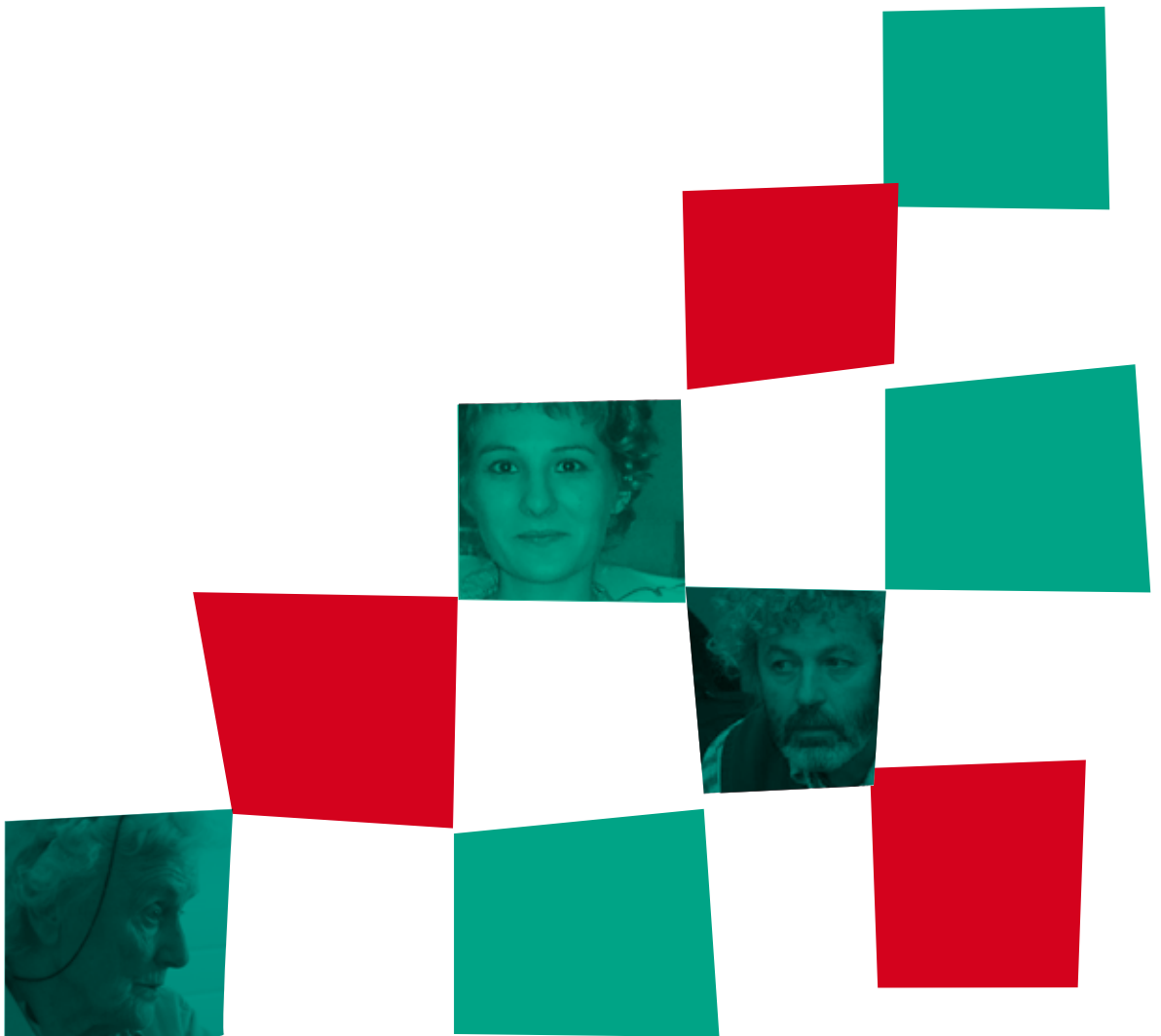


# The Adult Learner 2009

The Irish Journal of  
Adult and Community Education





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THE ADULT LEARNER 2009

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# The Adult Learner

## 2009

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## Editorial Comment

It was January 1933 and Hitler was still some distance from assuming absolute power in Germany. A young boy was looking through the window of his home in Breslau from where he could see workers raise a huge flag on the roof of the local post office. The Swastika blew open to full length and the boy's mother explained in a voice quivering with emotion that this was a wonderful day when a new era of justice begins and a wonderful future awaits. Within three months the first concentration camp was established in the suburbs of Breslau. In the spring elections a majority of those elected in the city were Nazi. In the same month trade unions were dissolved, books by Thomas Mann and Emile Zola were banned. But the economy grew, industrial production rose, and by 1939 unemployment was eliminated. In November 1938 the carefully planned orders for *Kristallnacht* were obeyed in Breslau. Stalin's Gulag was already twenty years in existence and had already murdered more than Hitler's camps would ever manage. Seventy years later the boy at the window would ask: 'Can one ever tell these things and be understood?' (Davies, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. In Ireland too we have been attempting to understand tragic events.

Bruce Arnold's book *The Irish Gulag* is about the abuse of children in Irish institutions. Now to our horror we 'discover' that our country has operated a state and church-sponsored cruel and vicious system, with a system of internal exile where children (and women – Magdalene Sisters) were condemned and children 'guilty' by court order, to spend their childhood years in forced labour and brutality. A painful and troubling learning process has been taking place in which various people have attempted, with great success, to 'tell these things and be understood.' These events now determined to be true by the Ryan Commission Report may be the defining 'story of the year.'

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<sup>1</sup> Davies, N. & Moorehouse, R. (2003). *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City*. London: Pimlico.

But other events compete for that title. The current economic depression has been made worse by a banking system, political system and land speculators who have brought about a social and economic crisis. How can ordinary people understand the scandal, corruption and gambling of financial institutions? How can anyone even contemplate a way forward?

These events raise important learning questions. What do we need to know in order to raise our children well and in order to also contribute to the economic survival of this country? How can we learn such things? Who will teach? Is there a task for an educational system here? Is the educational system also implicated? How can it not be? Who should be teaching about such things? And how? Who would prefer if we did not come to any understanding of these matters? Who will benefit from us not knowing? It raises questions both about who we were, who we are and who we would like to be for the future. It is scarcely imaginable, but it may be the case (and we have to imagine it) that, to paraphrase the sociologist Žižek who characterised ideology today as, ‘they knew it, but they did it anyway.’ This is the ‘awful truth!’

These events raise significant questions for adult educators and for our understanding of lifelong learning. So much learning is called for, so much to understand, so much to change.

A number of appeals have been made to raise a public memorial to the children of industrial schools. We already have memorials to the famine emigrants and the Duffy article in this edition highlights some of the possibilities of memorialising awful events in Japan and Cambodia. This is with a view to identifying a role for these memorials in supporting reconciliation and peace building in Ireland.

Tom Inglis in his book *Truth, Power and Lies* (2003) successfully unearthed the truth about the society in which we live in contrast to the lies that have been so much part of our self-understanding. In this edition Inglis highlights a counter possibility to the ‘awful truths’ that emerge from a consumer society and free market economy. In this more polemic piece he argues that the task is to reclaim community, engage in collaborative learning and redeem the possibilities that reside in a ‘good, fulsome and pleasurable life.’

Other topics also need to be addressed and David McCormack articulates a different take on the kinds of reflections that might be worthwhile for teachers and educators of adults. As teachers of adults (or if you prefer, as facilitators) we too have thoughts and feelings about the experiences of pedagogy. They are not often described, investigated or interrogated. The emotional dimension of teaching and learning is explored by means of an autoethnographic story written as an approach to reflective practice. This approach supports research into self and culture, the culture of adult education. The space this approach opens up between writer and reader is considered to be a potential site of meaning making. Teachers have feelings and experiences and narratives too that are rarely examined as in this example of reflective practice.

Amanda Slevin writes of Donegal to explain why 'Up here it's different' and disadvantaged. In divided communities, with deep fault lines, but with significant peace process funding, and adult education infrastructure has been built with learning centres and resources. Economic, environmental, social and political difficulties are examined by looking at two rural communities in East Donegal. The article explores the importance of the community and voluntary sector in responding to issues within communities and posits community development as an essential process in making change. The author outlines the interconnectedness of community development and community education and refers to the relevance of Freire's pedagogy for this work.

Rosarii Griffin in a reflective 'work in progress' describes her experiences working with teacher educators in Africa. The paper describes research projects developed in conjunction with the author's counterparts in Lesotho. Although the research project work is yet in its infancy, the author reflects on insights gained from working as an Irish person, in Africa, and the challenges posed to one's Eurocentric assumptions.

Three Irish adult educators raise hugely important practical questions. Alison McCallion describes how to bring Paulo Freire (or his ideas) into a learning group that visits the Botanic Gardens as part of a horticultural course and how her experiences at an art exhibition on two different occasions (both in Ireland and Sweden) impacted on her work of as a teacher. Valerie McGrath explores how the Andragogy of Malcolm Knowles continues to be important for practitioners in Ireland. From a background in family literacy Mary Flanagan explores the connections with active citizenship.

In a new development for the journal there is a brief Comment Section. The important intervention in the previous issue invited adult educators to be more critical of theorising in our field and not be ‘outside the remit of our own critical positioning.’ A group of authors take up the invitation and the Comment Section attempts to create a more dialogic dimension in the journal.

Finally, as Editor for this year, I want to express generous acknowledgement and appreciation for Eileen Curtis who has edited *The Adult Learner* since 2004.

**TED FLEMING**

NUI Maynooth

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# **SECTION ONE**

PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

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# ‘A Parcel of Knowledge’: An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Emotional Dimension of Teaching and Learning in Adult Education

DAVID McCORMACK

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## **Abstract**

*The emotional dimension of teaching and learning from the perspective of the teacher and learner in adult education is considered in this paper by means of an autoethnographic story written as an approach to reflective practice. The genre of autoethnography allows for the personal and the autobiographical as a legitimate site for research into self and culture, in this case the culture of adult education. The space this approach opens up between writer and reader is considered to be a potential site of meaning making and reader responses are considered to this end.*

## **Introduction**

I was sitting at the top table at a conference, a gathering of adult learners on a counselling course. It was coming towards the end of the day and, relieved though I was that we, the conference organisers, had coped well and that we had nearly made it to the end of the day, I was tired and less than fully alive to the final proceedings, though I doubt if anyone would have known.

We asked for contributions from the floor and one man, I will call him John, asked for the roving microphone. He named himself, said where he was from and told us that he wanted to say that six weeks ago, before coming on to the course he would not have been able to ask for the microphone and speak in public. That is all John wanted to say that day, to demonstrate for himself and to his peers that his confidence had grown, that at least in part, he had found a voice. A colleague was more alert to the significance of this than I, and she talked to John afterwards. She learned that because of a speech difficulty he had stammered his way through life but that participating on the course had allowed him to face his fears and to push beyond the limits he had felt constrained by.

I think that, as adult educators, we are familiar in our work life with stories of learners growing in both skill and knowledge, as well as in their capacities to engage more fully with self and others through participation in adult education. But I am not sure that we have found ways of allowing such stories to be claimed as valid scholarly knowledge.

### **Autoethnography and writing as a mode of inquiry**

So I decided to present an autobiographical story as the centrepiece of this paper to raise some issues around the complex process of the emotional process of adult learning. The story is an 'insider story' (Dirkx, 2006b), written out of my habit of using writing as an approach to reflective practice (Bolton, 2005, 2006) and as a mode of inquiry (Richardson, 1997; Richardson and St Pierre, 2005). It seeks to be what Speedy calls a 'parcel of knowledge-in-context' (2005, p.63) which embodies the experience of working as a facilitator of adult learning, and being in turn changed by that experience. At this level, it might achieve what Ellis and Bochner (2000, p.744) suggest that personal narratives can do;

[they] create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalisation, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question.

But it is not a straightforwardly autobiographical story. Stanley (1992, p.14), in the context of feminist approaches to research, coined the term 'the autobiographical I' to refer to the way in which there is no simplistic, innocent self at work in writing subjectively, the individual is always closely articulated with others. The genre of autoethnography is a growing resource that uses self-stories and life writing to 'display[s] multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p.739). Such writing typically 'feature[s] concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterisation, and plot' (Ellis, 2004, p.xix). However, rather than seeing these genres 'as ways of retreating into personal, inner subjectivity,' they are an important resource for understanding culture that we can adopt 'as means to establish and stabilise intersubjectivity' (Roth, 2005, p.15).



### **I'm an adult educator, get me out of here<sup>1</sup>**

I couldn't justly call it badgering, but Bob<sup>2</sup> asked me over and over again until eventually I gave in. It was Christmas Eve when I succumbed to flattery, he said; I know you've said no before and I know you've offered the services of all of your colleagues, but I'm asking you. I want you to come and talk to us about adult education. We are all trained as teachers but now we are working with adults and we need some input from somewhere.

We were supping pints of Guinness in what passed for us as a 'local' in the town we had both married into. Work and stress just seemed so far away, so, despite my long-standing aversion to talking as 'expert' to any group, and despite all the fears and dreads that it brought up in me, I said I would.

Convivially we started planning together and a day-long 'Introduction to Facilitating Adult Learning' took shape; I would welcome the group, one colleague would run a group facilitation workshop, another colleague would talk to them about theoretical developments in the field of adult learning and I would finish the day talking about what I fancifully thought of as 'the emotional dimension of adult learning.'

My practice is to prepare my presentation, somewhat meticulously, well in advance of the nerves starting. This I did and I can see my notes now in my mind's eye, all headings and spidery writing. A manuscript of good practice in supporting adult learners. Well-written and well-referenced and, I now realise, fundamentally safe and boring. The day approached and with it my anxieties grew, but the security blanket of my precious paper helped hugely. That morning I met Bob and feigned relaxation and confidence. But as the group arrived the pretence strained me more and more. They arrived one by one, all big cars and briefcases, ties and power dressing. My sweater felt more drab than usual and my presentation notes lay limply crumpled in my backpack.

My imagination ran riot and I pictured these professionals in their various work contexts, all confidence and bluster, working with their groups, powerpoint

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<sup>1</sup> The workshop described here is less a realist description of one event and more a conflation of a number of workshops.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Bob for his permission to refer to our work together in this way and for his comments on a draft of the paper.

presentations running smooth as their dress. Experienced facilitators of growth, change and development in schools, colleges, working daily in the real world of hugely challenging issues with stressed and over worked educators.

I welcomed them and introduced the outline of the day and left them in the intimidatingly capable hands of my two colleagues. I wandered back to the office, the cold of the day seeping perniciously into my bones. I felt about seven years old. Young enough to feel terror, old enough to feel shame. My old pattern, well known to me but as powerful as ever, took over and I dreamed of running away.

Back in the relative safety of the office, I began to think about it. A question suggested itself to me: if I could run, cry off ill, or otherwise avoid the feelings, would I? Immediately the answer came: No, I would be depriving myself of an important opportunity for an adventure, for growing up just a little more. I thought of my children and how I might better help them face their fears by me facing mine.

So with no apparent way out, a second question, and it seemed to me to be a much more important one, surfaced in the panic: 'now I know what I would be missing if I backed out, but if I did back out, what would the *group* be missing?'

Shockingly fast the answer came from I know not where: 'vulnerability, the voice of vulnerability.' Something quickened inside me as the fear gave way to excitement. I knew immediately that I was on to something really important. There and then I found myself ceremoniously dumping my precious notes, all the words I had laboured over went head first into the grey institutional bin. I knew what I needed and headed in hope and haste to the library. The previous week I had been to a poetry reading by the poet Paula Meehan, and one poem she read that evening had stayed with me. I was lucky, the book was there and I re-read the poem to see if it is as powerful as I remembered;

*Literacy Class, South Inner City*<sup>3</sup>

One remembers welts festering on her palm  
 She'd spelt 'sacrament' wrong. Seven years of age,  
 preparing for Holy Communion. Another is calm  
 describing the exact humiliation, forty years on, the rage

at wearing her knickers on her head one interminable day  
 for the crime of wetting herself. Another swears she was punch drunk  
 most her schooldays – clattered about the ears, made to say  
*I am stupid; my head's a sieve. I don't know how to think.*

*I don't deserve to live.*

Late November, the dark  
 chill of the room, Christmas looming and none of us well fixed.  
 We bend each evening in scarves and coats to the work  
 of mending what is broken in us. Without tricks,

without wiles, with no time to waste now, we plant  
 words on these blank fields. It is an unmapped world  
 and we are pioneering agronomists launched onto this strange planet,  
 the sad flag of the home place newly furled.

(Meehan, 2000, p.51)

Having found the poem I now knew what to do. I had an objective correlative, something external to me to hold and contain my conviction that vulnerability is an inevitable part of the learning process in adult life; that it is a vital, in every sense of the word, part of change; that when it is your job to facilitate change there will inevitably be all sorts of emotions stirred up, not least in yourself; and that supporting yourself to face this distress is an essential resource in a facilitator's work. I knew now that what I really wanted to say to them did not reside in my prepared script, but in a space of dialogue between us – the poem a perfect catalyst for the conversation.

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<sup>3</sup> The poem appears in P. Meehan, *Dharmakaya* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000). I am very grateful to Paula Meehan and to Carcanet Press for kind permission to reproduce the poem in full here.

The time came to meet the group and the storm of anxiety had worked its way through my system. I met the group and I told them the story of the morning, of my projections about them, of my search for the poem and the significance it holds for me.

I read the poem and looked at the feelings it evokes. It is reasonable to assume, I told them, that all these feelings and more will be alive, implicitly or explicitly, in the learning process. I talked about adult education as a transitional space on the road to the creation of new identity and the way that this brings up the anxiety of and resistance to change. I asked them questions about the ethics of ignoring on the one hand, or provoking on the other, these life experiences in the learning space. I talked about what it demands of us as adult educators to know the geography of the emotional territory we invite people into when they work towards change and growth.

I had talked for some time and I felt anxious to focus on them and their own experiences now that they have a grasp of the basic ideas I was expressing. I was aware of myself as having enjoyed the time, feeling it went well. But the tension of handing it over to the silent group is never easy: will they engage or will they stay silent? Or worse still will they talk out of a polite deference to myself, a close friend of one of their number.

There is a silence after my question: ‘what does any of this bring up in you?’ I was aware of Michael<sup>4</sup>, a large jolly man, whom I know to be the elder of the group, the one who they each looked to for a steer on how to be. I could see him deep in thought. In one defining moment, he undid his tie, slumped in the chair but paradoxically took up more space in the room. ‘Sometimes...’ he said, and I make no apology for the language, for this is what he said, ‘sometimes I fucking hate this job.’

There was something of a collective sigh of relief, and they were off, talking about the difficulty of the work, the performance they have to engage in daily, the support they offer to people, the resistance that they encounter almost every day. We took these stories and drew them on the flipchart and questioned them, interrogating them from the point of view of relationship, transformation, participation and resistance.

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<sup>4</sup> I have changed a number of details, including name, in order to protect confidentiality.

Later that day I met them all. This time in a different ‘local’, mine as it happens. They were at pains to buy me drinks and we talked about where they came from and how they spend their time when they are not working. Michael talked about his passion for diving and I imagined him, divested of suit and tie, submerged in a different element. I weakly remembered the morning encounter and how I had felt about him, and I marvelled, as I so often do, at how comforting it is, how very inspiring it is, that we manage, despite the interferences of fate and ego, to keep surprising ourselves.

### **The emotional dimension of adult learning**

It seems to me that processes of growth, change and development in adult education are more complex than I understood when I first began reading Freire (1970), Mezirow (1990) and Brookfield (1986, 1987) as key authors in the field I was operating in. My conviction grew over time that the emotional complexity of the process, particularly the vulnerability that lies at the heart of change, was not adequately theorised there and this sent me on a search for writers who offered such an understanding. I now want to offer a view drawn from these writers, not as purveyors of ‘ultimate truth’ typical of modern scholarship, but as important aspects of my own ‘positioning’ as a researcher (Roth, 2005, pp.13-14).

The story I present here was written out of an experience of vulnerability in professional life. Like John, at the start of the paper, there are personal and biographical aspects to my experience. But this vulnerability is also reflective of the emotional dynamics of teaching and learning that underpin the educative process in general (Nias, 1996; Noddings, 1996; Saltzberger-Wittenberg, et al., 1983), and the ‘intrinsically emotional business’ (Claxton, 1999, p.15) of working with adults in particular.

The story attempts to symbolise and work through my own moment-by-moment emotional process in facilitating a particular group. It details the assumptions I had about the group as they arrived and tracks the way in which I sifted this through so as to discern how best to cope with the situation for the group and for myself.

The story also draws attention to the relational aspect of the educative process and embodies the experience of both the complexity and the potential that lies there. The workshop participants knew well how to create a safe and support-

ive relationship with their groups, but they had no training as to how to work with the demands of any such relationship. Robertson (1996) writes of the need for such skills to be recognised and professionalised in adult education. He argues that adult educators are encouraged to promote transformative learning through facilitative relationships, but are not adequately prepared or supported to manage the dynamics of such relationships (Robertson, 1996, p.44).

My story attempts to embody the process of working in the powerful emotional context in which much adult learning occurs (Dirkx, 2001, 2006a) and points up the way in which the emotional dimension of working with adults operates at both conscious and unconscious levels of our selves. This is evident in the projections I had about the group before I encountered them, but also, in a parallel manner, in the resistance, apathy and anger that they themselves encounter regularly in their own developmental work. Such 'experience of emotion' in learning contexts, Dirkx (2006, p.22) suggests, are opportunities for 'establishing dialogue with the unconscious aspects of ourselves.' The story attempts to model a way to 'consider the symbolic meaning of emotion and affect' by attuning ourselves more carefully to our own processes of individuation and thereby heightening our awareness of that process in learners' lives (2006a, pp.18-21).

This act of symbolising professional experience in imaginative language places us in what Hunt and West (2006, p.164) call a 'border country' that straddles 'emotion and cognition, the social and psychological, self and other, education and therapy.' As the group of educators in the story seem to find out, this border country, when well managed and handled, can offer a space in which learners and educators alike can 'develop deeper and more critical understanding, and a stronger sense of who they are and want to be' (Hunt and West, 2006, p.174).

The story offers a pattern of experience whereby my own anxiety as educator is allowed to become a gateway to professional development and learning, for myself, if not necessarily for the group. West (2006, p.42) offers us a view of how anxiety can manifest itself in adult learning settings;

Anxiety, especially around threats to the self, can generate a whole range of defensive manoeuvres, often unconscious...in adult learning. These manoeuvres focus themselves around, for instance, our capacities to cope, or whether we are good enough, or are acceptable to, or even deserve to be accepted by, others.

The story tries to work to rehabilitate rather than disown this anxiety and points up the possibilities it holds for growth and change. Michael's experience of acknowledging unease with the stresses and strains of work offers possibilities of dialogue and learning that denial or stoicism do not. Coping with such anxiety requires the appreciation of the educative arena as a 'transitional space' where 'identity may be negotiated and risks taken in relation to potentially new identities' (West, 2006, p.42). West (2006, p.35) proposes a view of lifelong learning that honours both the social and the psychological, which can enable people 'to remain creative, rather than paranoid, in the face of constant change and uncertainty, and compose meaningful biographies in the process.'

There are important critiques of this position. Ecclestone (2004), for example, plots the rise of a therapeutic ethos in adult education whereby issues of self-esteem and vulnerability are located in individual psyches rather than in wider social and political forces. While recognising the cogency of the argument, my paper is an attempt to articulate a version of Adult Education as an intrinsically emotional activity that is potentially complex in its emotional resonance. It further suggests that adult educators need to be able to manage the emotional dynamics of teaching and learning, doing this most effectively by becoming attuned to their own emotional lives as educators, particularly concerning the impact of the educative relationship on them.

### **Writing inquiry as transitional space**

Bond (2000) raises the question as to whether autoethnographies of this kind count as research. Goodall (2008, p.38) rehearses the usual objections that such self-narratives are narcissistic indulgences rather than real scholarship. However, he contrasts the genre of autoethnography as 'driven by lived experience and informed by scholarly resources' (2008, p.40). For Pelias (2004, p.11), autoethnographic stories 'seek connection' and are 'listening for [the reader's] answer' (2004, p.11). Autoethnographies are not just personal texts. Rather they 'move writers and readers into this space of dialogue, debate, and change' (Holman-Jones, 2005, p.764) and therefore need listeners and readers to fill them out.

Speedy refers to the spaces between writer and reader as 'imaginative sites in which to extend, provoke and create knowledge in new ways' (2008, p.33). These sites seem to come especially alive when there is dialogue between writer and

reader which creates what de Freitas (2008, p.474) calls a ‘moment of response, when the unanticipated appears, when the Other enters the work and leaves the traces of their...experiences.’

### Readers’ responses

And so, following Sparkes (2007), I sought out some readers, all experienced adult educators, to whom I sent this paper inviting feedback<sup>5</sup>. My feelings in doing so were stark indeed: I felt exposed and vulnerable; whatever confidence I had in the paper seemed to dissolve like candyfloss. Monologue seemed much more comfortable at that point than dialogue (Goodall, 2000, p.11). I began to have huge questions about the paper, my motivations for writing it and to question the validity and value of autoethnographic writing.

The feedback when it came was both supportive and challenging. Anne, for example, talked of ‘resonating’ with the story, particularly as her reading of the paper bizarrely coincided with a very distressing session she had had with a group, after which she felt vulnerable ‘in a way that I have not felt for a very long time – maybe even never before.’ Mary and Paula both talked of feeling moved by reading the paper and of a shift in perspective on their work as educators. Mary talked of the paper as;

bringing up the issue of keeping oneself nurtured and alive to the creative process – vital, I think, to the transformative process. I know that when I neglect this aspect of my life usually due to overwork, I get stodgy in my thinking and my approach.

Mary pointed out that my lack of vitality in the story of the conference that opened the paper contrasted sharply with the sense of openness and responsiveness in the centrepiece story. I was reminded as I read this that I was indeed ‘stodgy’ and overworked as well as burdened by a family health issue at the time of the conference, and that I felt as if I was going through the motions of being present while feeling fundamentally empty and absent. Mary goes on to talk about how she maintains her aliveness;

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<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Paula Meehan, Mary B. Ryan, Tony Walsh and Anne B. Ryan for their feedback, which has had a substantial effect on the paper. Extracts from their feedback are included in the paper. I am grateful also to Brid Connolly who read and offered feedback on the paper.



The story reminds me of the importance of going to films, plays, readings, galleries, gardens, hill-walks – activities I love and that nurture my soul. It is the poem [in the story] that grounds your discussion in the emotional realities and struggles of learning and that facilitated a real conversation.

Paula, the poet whose work was quoted in the story said;

I found the experience of reading it powerfully moving and felt I understood the act of witness that work in adult education involves in a different way afterwards. You know, even though much of my own work is in second chance education or non-traditional settings for learning, I rarely allow my own emotional states to have space for expression. Somewhere it has seeped into me, without it ever being explicit, that to be ‘professional’ I must hide some aspect of my humanity. I think your paper has focussed some of my anxiety around showing my own vulnerability as a teacher.

When I read Paula’s response I began to question myself: do I show my vulnerability as an adult educator? Probably not. Do I hide aspects of my own humanity? All the time. My search is for an alternative to hiding it or defending against it, or at the other extreme, dumping or spilling it. The story tries to embody the process of containing and working with anxiety, trusting that it can be a sign of being fully alive in an educative process, a strong and true part of it, a doorway to growth rather than a closed and sealed off experience.

Tony, Anne and Mary all commented on the way in which, in the particular draft they read, the academic reference seemed disconnected from the life affirming centrepiece story. This helped me to realise that, though I intended this paper to model a way of writing that engaged the personal and subjective as legitimate sites for research, I had cut and pasted from lecture notes and the like as a way of fulfilling the academic criteria of a paper. It seems to me now that this is an exact parallel to the ‘well written and well referenced’ paper that I had prepared in the story; that is, I protected myself from the exposure of the personal and the subjective by hiding behind academic reference and review. There is good reason for protecting oneself in this way. Anne hints at this when she talks about how reading the paper heightened her awareness of the vulnerability, not only of the educator, but also of the writer. She says that reading the paper;

made me very aware of the fact that when you write something in a book or article, it is there for ever and you may be judged on foot of it, by anyone who cares to offer an opinion...I am preparing a book for publication and having a great deal of trouble getting a satisfactory version of the final chapter together. I have suspected for a few weeks now that one of the reasons for this taking so long is that I am terrified of letting the book out into the public domain. I feel I will be judged harshly.

It seems to me now that one way of dealing with this fear is to defer to the voices of the authoritative others that reside in academic textbooks rather than speaking in one's own voice. Indeed, Anne's response prompted me to reflect on the double edged sword of finding a voice, as John did at the conference: though it is liberating, it is also scary, in that this new public self may, indeed, be judged harshly.

The experience of receiving much of this feedback from my colleagues was both personally challenging and hugely developmental. It was itself a mixed emotional dynamic of being at once open and defensive, feeling both affirmed and 'criticised'; a process all the while characterised by a sense that, though I was already somewhat dimly aware of many of the things that were pointed out to me, I depended on the voice of the other to mirror them back to me.

### **On reviewing and being reviewed**

I also received feedback from the process of peer review that followed submitting the paper for publication. Feedback came from the anonymous external reviewer and it affirmed much in the paper. It pointed out some contextual and theoretical looseness (which I then changed), but also, once again, it challenged me in interesting ways. The reviewer questioned the fact that Michael in the story, and indeed Bob, my friend, had not been consulted as part of the reader/writer dialogue. I had considered doing this but I was aware that I had no relationship with Michael beyond the day we spent together and that Bob, my friend, was, at that time struggling with very difficult feedback from his own thesis supervisor and I felt I owed it to him to respect his sensitivities. But, I realised when it came to being myself challenged as to why I did not consult him, that another issue lay lurking behind my concern.

I had remembered him saying out of the corner of his mouth, on the day of the session described in the story, that the space I had created with the group was good. I believed him and felt much warmth and appreciation from the group on the night later in the pub. But, I realised when I did send the paper to Bob for his comment that I felt quite vulnerable: what if he remembered the day differently to me; what if he thought it was narcissistic to write about it in the way I have done; what if I just got it plain wrong?

So I sent the paper to Bob who made a number of comments. He said;

One of the recommendations on the day was that we all need a ‘supervision’ type of support. All agreed that this was absolutely necessary but .... the issue was never again mentioned by anyone. I knew exactly what you were talking about as I had been in supervision in a previous job. None of the others in the group had been in a professional supervision group before – I think they saw it as counselling. Why was it never again mentioned by the group, I ask myself.

In part this does support the sense that indeed I had got it plain wrong: it would seem the day had little lasting effect on the group members. But a second comment he made clarified something for me: he asked me ‘who is the learner in this paper – the group or you or both?’ Immediately I realised that the lasting learning from the incident is my own. Autoethnography is here used as a vehicle for professional development, as an ‘educative space for bringing the inquirer’s subjectivity into the foreground, enabling it to be examined critically and reflectively, and developed further via creative and contemplative thinking’ (Pereira, Setelmaier and Taylor, 2005, p.51).

### **Over to you<sup>6</sup>**

So, in writing this paper I am not making claims for anyone else’s learning – that would be a different paper. But there is another claim made here, and that is the claim that writing and reading also constitute spaces for dialogue and learning, and indeed, for transformation (Goodall, 2000, p.40). It suggests that the capacity to encounter the other in writing and reading is a viable path to transformative learning (Pereira, Setelmaier and Taylor, 2005).

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<sup>6</sup> Readers’ responses are invited and welcomed and can be sent to me at david.mccormack@nuim.ie

So, having read the story and some of the methodological and theoretical considerations that surround it, what are you left with? Did the story invite you into a space of reflection yourself? Did it help you to think about your own experience of working with adult learners, particularly the emotional dimension of facilitating and participating in adult learning? Does it help you to tune in to stories you might tell that help you and others to reflect on your work with adult learners, or on your own experience as an adult in a constant learning process? Do you have a sense that these stories might live as research? If so, then you have allowed yourself to enter the transitional space between writer and reader that holds out possibilities for meaning making and consciousness raising. And so to answer the question that Bond (2000) posed about autoethnography 'but is it research?' I offer a comment from Paula, one of the readers of the paper who says that she was struck;

by how powerful the non-institutionalised approach to the presentation of research can be. A more aboriginal way of being seems the way forward – that we transmit knowledge and understanding through the crafty, coded, and far reaching vehicle that is story.

A more eloquent argument for autoethnography I can scarcely imagine.

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# Promoting Adult Learning in Public Places: Two Asian Case Studies of Adult Learning about Peace through Museums and Peace Architecture

GAVIN DUFFY

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## **Abstract**

*This paper explores an area of adult learning that has received little attention of late, the terrain of public education through museums and civic architecture. The goal of promoting adult learning in public places e.g. through the work of museums has become commonplace in countries seeking to encourage adult learning about peace. This invariably entails a ‘hands on’ approach to peace education through a process of consultation and dialogue with the concerned communities. These aims are particularly important when the municipality is looking at issues of peace, as in the case of the two Asian case studies discussed in this article with societies recovering from a post-conflict situation. These case studies will have especial interest for adult educators in Ireland. In the International Year of Reconciliation in 2009 the Consultative Group on the Past had published its recommendations, including a Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland (CVSNI). This paper will show how adult learning in a public milieu can contribute meaningfully to a reconciliation process.*

## **Introduction**

In promoting adult learning in public places, the governments of Japan and Cambodia, have sought to convey a message of peace, and peace museums and peace architecture provide inspiring and enjoyable opportunities for learners to make meaning in their own way. This is adult learning in the most public of places and it is also about creating a municipal culture of peace. Nowhere can these goals be more important than when societies are recovering from conflict.

Municipal authorities can often make a significant contribution to peace education with adult audiences and thereby encourage an inclusive approach to community peace-building. In looking at the potential for adult education this article explores the emergence of peace museums and the salient issues raised for the wider subject of exhibiting peace. It does this through a discussion of two case studies drawn from the experience of Japan and Cambodia. The experience of this unique form of adult learning in Asia has considerable relevance for what we might be able to achieve in Ireland.

In the twentieth century, Japan and Cambodia endured traumatic human losses. In Japan this arose from the post-WW2 legacy of the Atomic bomb, and in Cambodia, in the wake of the Khmer Rouge's mid-1970s indiscriminate programme of 'auto-genocide.' The respective recent histories of Japan and Cambodia are appropriate exemplars of the problems and possibilities that arise as societies earnestly confront the potentially contentious issues of societal reconciliation and peace memorialisation.

### **Peace through peace museums and peace architecture**

The general public will often view museums more as 'custodians of war memorabilia' than as 'purveyors of a vision of peace.' Thus at the launch of America's first embryonic 'Peace Museum' in Chicago in 1981, its founding director, Marianne Philbin regretted that war memorials were so ubiquitous while her country (by contrast) still possessed 'no proper museum dedicated to building peace.' It has taken much independent initiative to progress the goal of peace memorialisation and so to exhibit those (often intangible) fragments of physical and cultural heritage that might constitute 'a lexicon of peace.' Such an object is meritorious in any part of the world but the challenge is all the more worthy and compelling in countries possessing a recent history as tragic as Japan and Cambodia.

In the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, the Genocide Museum at Tuol Sleng is a visible memory of a society's cavernous physical and mental wounds while across its municipal landscape, Japan's atomic legacy still looms formidably within living experience. For this reason, this article will explore the experience of violence transcendence in these two Asian nations, and seeks to evaluate these peoples have grappled with the construction of memory in a post-conflict



society. This process is particularly important if we are to genuinely understand the challenge of promoting peace through adult learning. There are many lessons that might be learned for our adult learning work in Ireland.

Certainly, the psychological nightmare which haunted post-WW2 Japan, and which cast a shadow over its post war societal reconstruction, is poignantly documented in Robert Jungk's monumental, *Children of the Ashes*. Conversely, Japan provides us with welcome inspiration in the rich contribution (since WW2) that Japanese national and prefectural governments, as well as NGO initiatives, have made to the birth of the modern peace museums movement. Yet the construction of such diverse 'edifices to peace' in post-war Japan has not been without controversy, reflecting (and sometimes accentuating) underlying political tensions. Japan is still decisively split between a peace-orientated 'left' and a rather militaristic 'right.' This is something that the political divisions in Ireland, which pertain on both sides of the border, may help us to understand. In recent years, however, there has been a tangible crystallisation of a peace community across most of the globe. We are beginning to see the evidence of these interests in Ireland and this is particularly reflected in the historical visualisation of our UN peacekeeping experience in several national museums in Dublin and other parts of the country. These facilities offer an important window in Ireland into the study of peace.

More generally, in the past twenty years (especially in Japan, Europe and America) there has been considerable interest in the peace museum idea and in a growing number of countries such museums, and accompanying peace parks and sculptures have opened. The product of state, group or individual efforts, these museums have preserved a robust peacemaking heritage, which has often comfortably co-existed alongside the history of war. Perhaps we can better delineate these very encouraging directions in Japan by dissecting the wider international phenomena of peace memorialisation? This is a genuinely public version of peace education, which is very much based on promoting adult education in the most public of places. A good example in Ireland would be the peace groups represented in the annual May Day parade.

How do societies escape from a legacy of conflict and begin to educate their populations about the importance of peace? It is certainly possible to offer some broad observations about global trends in the creation of 'peace museums' and

kindred examples of the public memorialisation of peace. They are a multi-faceted group. First of all, are the recognised and long-established core of museums that explicitly possess ‘peace’ in their title, and are dedicated to peace education through the visual arts. This would include Chicago's Peace Museum, the Peace Museum in Bradford UK, Oslo's Nobel Peace Prize Museum, and indeed more than thirty distinctive museums across the world. Examples span issues of regional peace (such as Germany's Peace Museum Meeder) to the global emphases of the Peace Palace at The Hague, and the League of Nations Museum in Geneva. It would also include museums of ‘public peacemaking activity’ such as the Museum of the Olympic Games in Lucerne, which documents the remarkable contribution of the ‘Olympic spirit’ to world peace. There is no obvious Irish candidate for inclusion in this list of museums apart from the UN display at Collins Barracks, and the UN exhibition in the National Museum of Modern Art.

This ‘family’ of museums also incorporates the search for peace ‘within peoples’ as in the Yi Jun Peace Museum in Holland whose founder has been lobbying for another Peace Museum strategically sited in the de-militarised zone which joins north and south Korea, to encourage future Korean reconciliation. Then there are many different ‘issue-based’ entities formed in response to specific events. There are quite a number of Japanese museums of this type, such as Liberty Osaka, with its focus on promoting human rights; Tokyo's Peace Museum Project on children's peace education; Nagasaki's Shokokumin Museum with its concern for Japan's war-time children; and the Poison Gas Museum on Okunoshima Island with its ‘righteous appeal’ against chemical weapons. All of these diverse entities share a common concern with the promotion of a very public type of education, whether for adults or to enable adults work with children. They are excellent examples of adult learning about peace through museums and peace architecture. Irish cases might include the Irish Jewish Museum and the ‘Irish citizenship’ section of the National Museum in Kildare Street.

It is also widely recognised that museums portraying the human devastation of the Nazi holocaust, and kindred museums dealing with other forms of human destructiveness, are rightly part of the peace museum family. Holocaust Museums (such as Yad Vashem in Israel or Washington DC's Memorial Museum) and interpretative centres at former concentration camps (e.g. Dacau and Bergen-Belsen in Germany, and Auschwitz in Poland); international venues such as Tokyo's Holocaust Education Centre; collectively deserve to be treated

as part of the increasingly all-encompassing *genre* of peace museums. The same is also true of museum battle-sites. In the last ten years wonderfully insightful peace centres have opened on the European war-sites of Caen and Verdun. An Irish case study would be the Boyne Heritage Site. More generally, on the theme of peace, one would also include museums dealing with nuclear war (such as the peace museums in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

There have been several dramatic architectural developments in the portrayal of peace in Japan. Of particular note is the new (1996) Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum that offers a radical re-interpretation of modern Japanese history. Predictably, it has outraged many on the Japanese political 'right.' In contrast, Tokyo's Peace Memorial Museum of the War Dead project, says little about Japanese militarism. Peace researchers will more likely see it as a 'war museum' than one of peace, demonstrating continuing sensitivities in Japan in the promotion of the peace museum concept. This, perhaps, says much about possibilities of promoting peace work through adult education, and especially through public space in modern Japan. That may be a reality that we understand very well in Ireland.

Nevertheless, it is encouraging that even the most grisly of wartime experiences can be transformed into a vehicle of peace education. Other 'issue-based' facilities that contribute to peace memorialisation include museums of genocide, such as the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, and the several genocide museums and public exhibits in the Rwandan capital, Kigali and the Burundian city, Bujumbura. Lithuania has a Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius. Similar proposals are under advanced discussion in Nigeria's Ogoniland (for the Ogoni people) and in Ottawa (for Canada's native population). Then there are an impressive collection of museums that focus on the humanitarian achievements of stalwart individuals or virtuous charitable societies, such as the Florence Nightingale Museum in London, Italy's Red Cross Museum at Castiglione, the Henry Dunant House or the International Red Cross Museum (the latter two being small private museums in the Swiss 'peace' city of Geneva). Out of the reality of human tragedy, insightful curatorial work has crafted a public space for adult education about peace. One might regard the 'civil war' section of the National Museum Dublin as one of the closest Irish comparators, especially with its emphasis on the birth of the new Irish state.

Geneva is not alone in finding municipal support to keep alive the tradition of peace culture and peace memorialisation. Other examples would include the Franz Jagerstatter House in St. Radegund, which memorialises the courageous German conscientious objector Dr Jagerstatter; the Carter Centre (the peace and democracy complex assembled by President Jimmy Carter in Atlanta, Georgia) or the Woodrow Wilson House in Washington DC, which is dedicated to the peacemaking activities of the 28th US President. Then there are ‘museums of non-violence’ - notably the more than fifty Gandhi museums in India (National Gandhi Museum, New Delhi and the Gandhi Memorial Museum, Madurai). Gandhi museums and exhibitions are also across Europe, Australia and the US. Our ‘peace theme’ might also include museums dedicated to particular non-violent campaigns, such as the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, which explores the American Civil Rights movement. When the municipal authorities in Japan and Cambodia turned to the memorialisation of peace, they already possessed a solid basis for direction and vision. It is reassuring to know that adult learners in Ireland also have some pertinent examples from which to draw.

### **Tokyo’s Peace Memorial Museum**

Precisely what might constitute a ‘peace museum’ and the manifest complexities of the ‘peace’ phenomena is controversially illustrated by two recent Japanese case-studies: Tokyo’s Peace Memorial Museum of the War Dead, and the completion of Nagasaki’s new Atomic Bomb Museum. These two ventures are controversial examples that are illustrative of the conflicts in modern Japanese society, suggesting that many post-WW2 issues remain unresolved. They therefore merit further serious discussion. Certainly the proposal in the 1990s of a quasi-mausoleum to the ‘war dead’ to be constructed in the Japanese capital proved something of a litmus-test both for current Japanese thinking about WW2 and for its peace movement. Many international commentators perceived the erection of what is essentially a ‘national war memorial’ as a ‘macabre leftover’ of the wartime generation. The debate was really about the espousing of a particular kind of ‘adult education’ that contained a very blinkered view of the concept of peace. These are debates with which we are familiar in the depiction of our own troubled modern history.

The Tokyo venture has also been interpreted as an ‘acid-test’ that might defoliate or at least expose the camouflage concealing these politically hostile patriotic sentiments or ‘closet militarism’ of that Japanese generation. Others see

the venture as more insidious, contributing to the renewal of precisely such 'war-time sentiments.' Located in the very centre of what is iconographically the essence of politically 'rightist' territory in Tokyo, this initiative preserves many of the 'sacred cows' of a conservative political tradition. Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine – with its symbolic associations with the Japanese 'war effort' abuts unto the 'Peace Memorial Museum of the War Dead.' One man's peace may well be interpreted as another's 'war.' It would be naive to assume that Japan has eluded the pervasive sentiments of its post-war legacy. The same might be said about the memorialisation of the Civil War in Ireland.

The Tokyo memorial is very nationalistic in its treatment of the issue of peace and the casualties of the war. Little is said about the dead of other nations, the lives of occupied Asian peoples, about exploited Korean 'comfort-women' or about 'forced war-time labour.' Yet these topics are impressively exhibited elsewhere in Japan by such innovative galleries as the Osaka International Peace Centre, Kochi's impressively activist-orientated Grassroots House, and the visually resplendent Kyoto Museum for World Peace. These latter institutions (respectively) reflect the progressive composition of the 'Peace Osaka' Committee, the community-focused Kochi peace activists, and the very independent stance adopted by the university authorities that run the Kyoto Museum. Ironically the latter's host, in eastern Kyoto, Ritsumeikan University, was one of the Japanese imperial universities that contributed many recruits to the Japanese officer corps during WW2. Nowadays, Ritsumeikan is a noted liberal campus with a strong international ethos. An Irish comparator might well be how we have come to terms with the legacy of our civil war institutions and indeed nationalist historical ideology.

Refreshingly, some of the militaristic themes explicit in the 'Peace Memorial Museum of the War Dead' are articulately challenged in other (more intellectually progressive) Japanese museums such as the Saiki Peace Memorial Hall Yawaragi, the Oka Masaharu Memorial Peace Museum in Nagasaki (which devotes generous space to highlighting the aggressive actions of Japanese forces); and the Peace Museum for the People which, by portraying the suffering of all soldiers, world-wide, 'hopes for the coming of world peace.' The issue of 'presenting peace' cuts to the heart of the debate about war guilt and the pressure for governmental apology and societal atonement. It could be argued that in common with the Jewish Shoah or holocaust survivors, Japan's atom bomb hibukasha may well be prone to political exploitation. At any rate these are certainly

weighty and sensitive matters. Just as the Smithsonian's failed 1995 exhibition on the Enola Gay indicated the strength of the USA's veteran lobby- the debacle occasioned by this project, illustrates the gulf that splits Japanese society on the issue of war responsibility. Where peace is concerned, promoting adult learning in public spaces still remains a potentially taboo subject. These are matters that Irish society is going to have a tackle as we grapple with reconciliation processes on both sides of the border.

It is a truism that debate on the issue of global peace remains a touchy topic even in modern Japan. These matters have yet to be genuinely confronted, and the Tokyo project has exposed the paralysis in attitude that exists among conflicting 'interest groups.' Sadly, it seems unlikely that the impulses impacting on this project would permit its metamorphosis into a credible peace museum. The museum is destined to enshrine memories of the Japanese 'war dead' at the expense of exploring 'global peace' and is unlikely to afford much comfort for those in the Japanese peace movement who have struggled to give genuine focus to issues of peace. The 'War Dead's Memorial Peace Prayer Hall' could prove to be a symbol of the residual divisiveness of Japanese public opinion. Happily, elsewhere in Japan, there is evidence that public education for peace has taken on a much more innovative and less nationalistic character. There are municipalities such as Osaka and Nagasaki where there has been an enormous emphasis on enlightened and progressive peace work, but across the country there remain pockets of strongly nationalist sentiment. To some degree that urban-rural contrast might also be true of present-day Ireland.

### **The metamorphosis of Nagasaki's International Cultural Hall**

The Nagasaki International Cultural Hall, predecessor of the new Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, was constructed in 1955 to house a rather conventional and politically noncontentious set of artefacts illustrating the city's nuclear tragedy. A fine account of the Hall's history is given in the classic study, *Nagasaki Speaks: a Record of the Atomic Bombing*. The original building was a rather traditional structure housing a vast collection of photographic material of the Atomic destruction, but eschewing any political interpretation. Indeed the photographs rather were left to 'speak for themselves.' Generations of Japanese families visited there. However, the new Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum marks a remarkable departure in the portrayal of issues of war and peace in Japan. It represents one of the most important developments on these issues in recent years. In April 1996 this substantial new museum was opened after an enor-

mous effort of strategic planning and quasi-philosophical cum political debate. The museum is actually inspired by the vision of Mr. Hitoshi Mutoshima (a politically progressive mayor of Nagasaki) who has been systematically attacked and victimised by the Japanese ‘right-wing’ because of his enlightened utterances about Emperor Hirohito's un-acknowledged ‘war responsibility.’ We know very well in Northern Ireland (especially) how both communities have criticised peace educators and so it is interesting to see that the debate about peace is as lively among educators in Japan.

Mr. Mutoshima hoped that the new Nagasaki museum would place the bombing of Nagasaki in an objective historical context. Its planners were certainly convinced that the museum must make reference to Japan's aggression in order to promote international understanding. Significantly, in March 1996, ‘rightist’ extremists objected to the inclusion of a photograph of the Nanjing Massacre, and soon after the museum's opening, demonstrations via loud-speaker cars were conducted at regular intervals by ‘right-wing’ organisations. The new Nagasaki museum marks an important step in Japan's fundamental re-interpretation of WW2 and its imaging of the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This process has not been without controversy but with this pain there has also come healing. The Nagasaki Museum might be viewed as part of a nation's emerging sense of dialogue with the ghosts of the past. One hopes that this process will ultimately prove therapeutic. It is a potent symbol of a very public approach to education for peace in modern Japan. It is therefore a very good example of a new variety of adult learning about peace through museums and peace architecture, and one that undoubtedly has potential lessons for us as adult educators and learners in Ireland.

### **Peace through adult learning in the public milieu of modern Cambodia**

From the nuclear ‘holocaust’ of Japan at the end of WW2, we turn to the ‘human holocaust’ of Cambodia's 1970's genocide years. During the 1970s Cambodia suffered the so-called ‘year zero’ of the Khmer Rouge who had seized power in 1975 with a determination to re-fashion ‘Democratic Kampuchea.’ This long period of political turmoil was followed by economic neglect and international isolation, that reduced the Cambodian population to the status of one of the poorest countries in the world. The UN Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC), which commenced work in 1992, sought to inject into UN programming a pervasive concern with human rights and peace. During the years of Khmer Rouge rule (1975 to end of 1978) Cambodia endured probably the

most violent of modern revolutions. The challenge of promoting peace through adult learning in Cambodia is a formidable one. The experience gained from this important work has great resonance for all involved in education for peace in our own countries.

Cambodia also has yet to confront the political legacy of its past. Its new government has not been reluctant to use peace education for political purposes. The memory of the 'year zero' is still a politically potent one. It seems probable that under the Khmer Rouge a greater proportion of the population died than in any other revolution in the twentieth century. Many of the victims were of the Lon Nol elite. However the majority were not part of the Cambodian old order and their execution was merely symptomatic of the desperate efforts of the regime to secure itself against potential opposition.

To do that, it created a massive torture machine, and sanctioned extra-judicial killing, and, ultimately, wholesale genocide against Cambodia's various religious and minority groups. To be precise, what Cambodia experienced during those harrying years was a gruesome form of 'auto-genocide' as the foci of inter-communal violence and retribution switched and alternated from ethnic and religious minorities to alleged internal dissidents. Interrogation centres were located in Phnom Penh and in the provincial towns such as Tuol Sleng. When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979, the Khmer Rouge had left behind them at the infamous camp S-21 a massive catalogue of systematic human rights violations that recorded the elimination of nearly twenty thousand people. It is a challenge to write about this subject as a peace educator, but the same must be said about issues of violence and interrogation in all our countries, including controversial issues of extra-judicial killing, torture etc. during the conflict in Northern Ireland.

In 1979, the State of Cambodia (SOC) turned Tuol Sleng Prison into the Tuol Sleng Museum of Cambodian Genocide and its burial camp at Choeung Ek was shortly thereafter made accessible to the public. Tuol Sleng represents a monument to the calculated social destruction of an entire society. Fortuitously, the past few years have seen a gradual confrontation of this tragic period of Cambodian history, and a new vision of a 'more peaceful present.' There are lessons for Ireland here. In the controversial proposals to re-cast the Maze pris



on in Northern Ireland as a Conflict Resolution Centre, it was feared that the prison might become a 'shrine of the republican struggle.' Educators were also aware that the Maze prison held painful memories for both communities in the North. It may be an acid-test of the failure of the communities to adequately confront the divided legacy of their atavistic past, that this proposal has gone no-where. It may be hoped that in the future, like Tuol Sleng, the Maze site could become a place of genuine peace and reconciliation.

Today Tuol Sleng Museum is a frightening exhibition of what a people can be forced to endure. Open for public eyes are the detritus of torture units and mass detention sectors, and (still) more psychologically moving are the stark rows of photographs of the many victims who died during interrogation. One begins to ponder how these images can really be used in the search for peace? But one should not despair, as modern Cambodia has creatively re-visioned these years of abject poverty and political tragedy. The result is striking to the visitor. Just as Cambodia has dealt with this painful place, no doubt Ireland will come to terms with the physical legacy of the troubles. In this process, peace educators have a vital role.

In Tuol Sleng the main part of the museum is a photographic kaleidoscope of genocide victims. Most of the camp's captives were photographed prior to execution. These images have been powerful tools in the politicisation of Cambodia's past, but might also serve as valuable resources in the conceptualisation and memorialisation of its peace. Certainly from Northern Ireland experience, it has been in the embracing of a politically contested urban morphology and a highly visible ethnic territoriality, that we have been able to talk about peace. Political graffiti and sectarian posters have allowed us to explore our divided past, and perhaps to move towards a more diverse present. If this can be effective in a country like Cambodia, it should be achievable by adult learners in Belfast or Derry.

### **Can genocide become peace? Examples from Cambodia**

It is very much a vision of hope that the detritus of violence can be re-cast to serve as a resource for promoting peace. S-21 was the largest of a network of interrogation centres that existed across Democratic Kampuchea. Choeng Ek (where almost nine thousand skulls have been counted) was the burial

ground for Tuol Sleng. The Vietnamese-installed government in their calculated political strategy to further discredit the Khmer Rouge exploited it. Once secure in power, the Hun Sen administration and its party stalwarts adopted a depressingly similar posture. It is only now, with a well-established national and international NGO movement, that Cambodians are genuinely confronting their past from the perspective of peace. In just the same way, community activists in the Catholic and Protestant communities are confronting these issues in the streets of Northern Ireland.

Yet for the Cambodian people the present potential of Choeung Ek as a vehicle for the reconciliation for Cambodian people is enormous. Indeed it could become a symbol for world society of the tragedy of human destructiveness. Predictably, the genocidal years of the Khmer Rouge have been used as a political platform by the Cambodian establishment in order to justify the exigencies of their own governance. Tuol Sleng swiftly became an instrument of propaganda by focusing hatred on its predecessor. This is all the more exasperating since most of the leaders of that Vietnamese-installed government, including Prime Minister Hun Sen and Minister Heng Samrin, had been Khmer Rouge officers. Today, even as they lie in un-named graves, Cambodia's blameless victims are exploited. This is a very potent vehicle for peace education and has enormous potential as a resource for adult education in post-genocide Cambodia. We are well aware of the sensitivity of the concept of 'victim' in Ireland, and especially in the North. One only hopes that a time will come when peace education will genuinely confront these issues. Adult educators should always be wary of exploitation. However, there is a necessity for Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek to play a constructive part in a process of consensus-building in Cambodia. Interrogation centres and concentration camps have been re-cast as 'museums of peace' in other countries. In Cambodia these camps cannot indefinitely remain such lucrative pawns in the power games of the political elite. They must take on a new post-conflict identity that might allow them to assist in the painful reconciliation of collective memory.

Such a transmogrification is vital if Cambodian society is to advance beyond the wretchedness of its recent historical experience. Cambodians have a saying about the horrors of their recent past: 'We were all conspirators- we were all victims.' It is time that Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek become symbols of an un-repeatable tragedy in Cambodian society so that the survivors can find

forgiveness and hope in what remains. Perhaps this can be part of a broader social and psychological process that may take Cambodians at last beyond their 'Killing fields.' One hopes that Cambodia's increasingly active NGO community can have the self-confidence to encourage such adult learning through its genocide museums and tragic peace architecture. It is a sign of hope that this is beginning to happen in Northern Ireland, and indeed on both sides of the border.

Slowly, post-genocide Cambodia is beginning to re-interpret its grisly past and to see in the country's most tragic of public spaces, the potential for reconciliation and peace memorialisation. There is clearly enormous potential for innovative examples of adult learning about peace through Cambodia's museums and peace architecture.

### **Conclusion: Adult learning about peace through museums and peace architecture**

The field of adult learning about peace through museums and peace architecture is now well established. Plans are under way for an African Peace Museum in Kenya, for a network of peace entities across Europe, and a new national peace museum in the United Kingdom is a real possibility. Moreover, many 'conventional' galleries have in recent years chosen to prioritise their exhibitions to include materials directly related to peace and to the peace movement. A good example is the remarkable metamorphosis of London's Imperial War Museum. Much maligned as 'trapped in a general's conceptual time-warp', the Imperial has shed its 'war-skin' to emerge as a genuinely discursive laboratory of ideas. It is undoubtedly true that even the mechanisms of war can be re-spun as powerful images for peace. Just as the legacy of the Irish troubles can be recast as a vehicle of reconciliation, peace educators can benefit so much from a comparative perspective.

It is a salient point, however, that what distinguishes 'war museums' from 'peace museums' lies less in physical heritage and content, than in the conceptual approach of the individual curators. The Victim's Memorial initiative in Northern Ireland has attempted to relate this concept to practical efforts of peace making and reconciliation. The project commenced in the city of Londonderry/Derry in 1987 and has provided a forum for public exhibitions on peace and human rights issues. This is both a problematic and challenging

subject given the proximity of the museum to the reality of political conflict in a place which has seen some of the worst violence of ‘the troubles’ It is a tribute to the success of the project that it has attracted broad cross-community support for its work, and that its exhibits have objectively explored aspects of the experiences of both sections of a divided community. At the same time, it is a symbol of the tendentiousness of the issue, that so many state initiatives for victims on both sides of the Irish border, have met with such controversy.

Adult educators might usefully take from this experience the key message that such initiatives must have public confidence and must be genuinely inclusive. There can be little dispute that such education, with the goal of promoting peace culture through the visual arts, is implicitly and explicitly part of that process. The examples we have explored from Japan and Cambodia exhibit aptly both the potential and the challenges of promoting adult learning in public places. Certainly adult learning about peace through museums and peace architecture is a potent force for good. As we celebrate the International Year of Reconciliation in 2009 let us hope for a public learning in these islands, which truly embraces such a culture of peace. A peace museum or a public symbol of community reconciliation on either side of the border may be an important focus for adult learning in the future. It is about building bridges, and in that process such peace architecture can prove a salient conduit.

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# **SECTION TWO**

## **PRACTICE ARTICLES**





# Up Here it's Different: Community Education in Rural East Donegal

AMANDA SLEVIN

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## **'Up here it's different'**

This familiar advertising slogan used to attract visitors to the rugged beauty of Co. Donegal, was correct in highlighting that things are different in Donegal, although not for the reasons we might connect with tourism. For many, Donegal evokes nostalgic images of old, rural Ireland such as close community bonds, unspoilt landscape, strong agriculture and fishing industries. Unfortunately such idyllic reminiscences are somewhat at odds with the realities of life in Donegal, often described by residents as 'the forgotten county.' While a beautiful landscape and a strong sense of community in many parts of the county are positive features, its overwhelming lack of development throughout the 'Celtic Tiger' era is evidence of its neglect in comparison to many other counties in the Republic of Ireland. According to Haase and Pratschke (2008), Donegal is the most disadvantaged local authority area within the whole country, situated within the most disadvantaged region in Ireland – the Border Region. Haase and Pratschke also state that the county of Donegal has a Relative Index score<sup>1</sup> of -10.0 and is termed a disadvantaged area, compared with the national Relative Index Score of 2.1. Relative Index Scores among electoral divisions (EDs) in Donegal range from -58.3 (Island of Aran) to -8.6 (Letterkenny Urban District) to 7.4 (Bundoran Rural ED, Donegal's most affluent area; Bundoran Urban ED has a Relative Index Score of -1.7).

Traditional employment in the agriculture and fishing industries is no longer viewed as viable for many families and individuals, resulting in unemployment and deeply felt changes within communities. Combined with weak infrastruc-

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<sup>1</sup> Relative Index Scores provide a standardised measurement of relative affluence or deprivation in a given area at a specific point in time.

ture, no train service, poor bus services, high levels of early school leaving and high unemployment rates, Donegal is different and disadvantaged. Common perceptions of ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland tend to view the conflict as contained within the six counties. However, sectarian, political and economic tensions have left profound scars in communities along the border. Without documenting the difficulties, violence, trauma and heartbreak of this period of recent history, it is important to recognise that;

No community can speak of itself without speaking of and to its history. Historical understanding and memory are intrinsic to any functioning notion of Community.

(Deane, 1994, p.xiv)

The ‘Troubles’ have left an indelible mark on communities with ramifications such as a lingering hurt and suspicion that can often affect inter-community relationships. The macro and micro tensions have a particular legacy for East Donegal with the neglect of the State impacting on nearly every community in the county. And these are outstanding issues before the current economic recession has been considered. While many of the towns and villages in Donegal exhibit some of the aforementioned economic, political, cultural and social issues, this article will concentrate on the villages of St. Johnston and Carrigans in East Donegal. These two villages, with a combined population of approximately 2,500, are situated two miles apart, along the River Foyle and border the counties of Derry and Tyrone.

### **St. Johnston & Carrigans – rural communities in East Donegal**

St. Johnston and Carrigans are in a rural area that is isolated due to its natural geographical location along the border and is negatively affected by weak infrastructure, poor roads, a near absence of public transport provision, a lack of social housing and difficulties in accessing essential services in areas such as health and education. With a 2006 Relative Index Score of -22.8, St. Johnston is classified as a very disadvantaged area (Haase & Pratschke, 2008), while Carrigans<sup>2</sup> is deemed a disadvantaged area with a score of -11.6.

Hand-in-hand with such high levels of disadvantage are high rates of educational disadvantage with 39.0 per cent of the population in the St. Johnston and 29.1 per cent of the Killea ED having only Primary Level Education compared with 18.9

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<sup>2</sup> The village of Carrigans is part of the Killea ED, therefore the above statistics relating to Carrigans cover a wider ED.

per cent nationally. In addition, only 14.1 per cent of the St. Johnston population and 21.2 per cent of people in the Killea area have third level education compared with the national rate of 30.5 per cent. Figures from the 2006 Census stated that the unemployment rate in St. Johnston was 19.2 per cent, more than double the national average; the male unemployment rate was 19.6 per cent compared with 8.8 per cent nationally, while the female unemployment rate at 18.6 per cent was in stark contrast to the national rate of 8.1 per cent. The male unemployment rate in the Killea ED was 17.4 per cent while the female unemployment rate was 12.7 per cent. The current economic recession has not had a positive impact on these unemployment rates.

Working in rural, disadvantaged communities such as St. Johnston and Carrigans requires a community development approach, valuing the lives and histories of each member of the community while seeking to build collective capacity to challenge the issues that affect the broader community.

### **The community and voluntary sector in Donegal**

In spite of our county's socio-economic difficulties and recent past, Donegal is a county of promise, of people seeking healthier, sustainable communities and a better society. Evidence of this movement of hope and change is the community and voluntary sector within Co. Donegal, a sector which has recently been damaged by the ending of Peace II funding and the consequent closures of a high number of community and voluntary projects. This funding source was invaluable to many communities within Donegal, assisting groups to address the needs of their communities, be they geographic, communities of interest or function. However, even with the heavy blow of funding cuts, a strong sense of community prevails and significant community activity continues to occur.

Activities within the community and voluntary sector in Donegal are far from homogenous, responding to a wide range of issues, needs and interests. To offer an insight into the diversity of activities, underpinned by an equally diverse spectrum of ideas and values, Popple's differentiation of eight models of community work practice is useful. These models are: community care; community organisation; community development; social/community planning; community education; community action; feminist community work; and black and anti-racist community work (2000, pp. 56-57).

### **Community development**

As a social activist and paid community development worker, I, like many colleagues, advocate a community development approach, which according to Lloyd 'is about social change linked to social justice, using a process that is collective, participative and empowering' (2000, p. 24). This approach is inseparable from other models of community work practice as it incorporates elements such as community education, community action, feminist community work and black and anti-racist community work. Community development, with its underpinning aim of social transformation towards an egalitarian and just society, is a different way of thinking, organising and acting compared to community-based work or service provision. While community development strives for collective empowerment, action and change, it is informed by a deep respect and recognition of the needs of individuals within communities, utilising a holistic approach that pays attention to the lives, experiences and history of each person.

Community development is important in any community, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged communities, as an activity that allows communities 'to express their felt human needs, and have some of them met' (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004, p. 156). Crickley suggests that community development removes the barriers to participation experienced by disadvantaged communities and 'is concerned with building active and sustainable communities, based on justice and respect' (2003, p. 42). The following quote by Ledwith synthesises the ethos of community development:

Community development begins in the everyday lives of local people. This is the initial context for sustainable change. It is founded on a process of empowerment and participation. Empowerment involves a form of critical education that encourages people to question their reality: this is the basis of collective action and is built on principles of participatory democracy. In a process of action and reflection, community development grows through a diversity of local projects that address issues faced by people in community. Through campaigns, networks and alliances, this action develops a local: global reach that aims to transform the structures of oppression that diminish local lives. A critical approach calls for a unity of theory and practice (praxis).

(Ledwith, 2007, p.1)

Explicit in this definition is the centrality of community education in community development.

### **Community education as an integral part of community development**

Community education, as an integral part of community development, is also concerned with social change and the achievement of a just and equal society. Jarvis describes education as ‘an essential tool in the process of community development’ (1995, p. 36), while Connolly proposes adult education as being ‘an essential element which transforms community development into a radical movement for social change’ (1996, p. 35). Connolly also suggests that adult education and community development are interdependent, with each playing a vital role in the implementation of the other’s principles. ‘Community development not informed by adult education remains domesticating and hierarchical. Adult education without community development stays personal, isolated and socially less powerful’ (Connolly, 1996, p. 40).

Transformative community development cannot happen without critical education, whether that occurs in nonformal, informal or formal settings. Critical education differs from traditional education in which the teacher (and the education system) view students as empty receptacles who must be filled by their ‘bank clerk teacher’s’ knowledge. In this traditional form of education, it is the teacher’s role to bank their information, and the experiences and status of their students is not regarded. The students are deemed as objects in the learning process, with education being something that is done to them rather than with them.

### **Freirean pedagogy**

The traditional method is incompatible with Freirean pedagogy, that challenges the teacher-student relationship, and indeed the entire traditional approach to teaching. Freire (1993, p.53) views teachers and students as co-investigators in learning and later states that teaching is ‘not about transferring knowledge or contents... there is, in fact, no teaching without learning... Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning’ (Freire, 2001, p.31).

Furthermore,

Education for Freire is never neutral: it either domesticates by imparting the values of the dominant group, so that learners assume things are right the way they are, or it liberates, allowing people to reflect critically on their world and take action to move society toward a more equitable and just vision.

(Merriman and Caffarella, 1999, p.325)

In disadvantaged communities such as those in Co. Donegal, a Freirean approach to community education and community development is crucial. Fundamental to Freire's work is the concept of conscientisation, which Freire (2001, p.55) describes as the critical awareness of the material, social, political, cultural and ideological conditions in which we find ourselves, conditions which almost always generate divisions that make it difficult to construct ideals of change and transformation.

The pinnacle of conscientisation is critical consciousness, which Ledwith (2007, p. 97) describes as 'the stage at which connections are made with the way in which the structures of society discriminate, reaching into people's being, shaping their lives in prejudiced ways.' Mezirow (1991, p.136) states that critical conscientisation entails a 'rigorous critique of the dehumanising social, political, and economic structures supported by ideologies. Through praxis, the union of reflection and action, learners engage in action to bring about social change.' Critical consciousness and praxis are necessary for transformation, both within community development and adult and community education but as Ledwith states 'critical consciousness is not liberating until it becomes a collective process for change' (2007, p.6).

While critical consciousness is a key aim of critical education, Freirean pedagogy begins by understanding where students are coming from – not simply their physical location but also how their frames of reference, and ways of being in the world, have been formed by social, economic, environmental and political influences. An important feature of Freire inspired adult and community education is learner – centeredness, which places the adult learner at the centre of the education process, recognising them as autonomous beings that bring with them, to the classroom, a range of experiences and knowledge which impact on their thinking and participation. Community workers and educators 'must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed' (Freire, 1993, p.77).

### **Theory into practice**

Such critical perspectives inform the direction of my own work as a community activist and educator, and I have been involved in the community and voluntary sector in Donegal for over eleven years. From November 2007 to February 2009, I was employed as a community development worker with the St. Johnston and Carrigans Family Resource Centre (FRC). The two villages are affected by a wide range of socio-economic difficulties, that members of the community seek to overcome through the FRC. Established in 2000 and managed by a voluntary management committee, the FRC offers a wide range of services and supports to the community including: 'Stepping Stones' playschool; parent and toddler group; youth project and after school service; lunch club for Older people; meals on wheels; counselling service; community based adult guidance; 1:1 advocacy and support; clerical services; women's group; men's group; and various community education programmes.

### **Provision of community based educational initiatives**

Community education is an established area of activity within the FRC and in our daily work we met members of the community who express an interest in different types of programmes, from literacy to arts and crafts to community based third level programmes. At the time of writing, the FRC was a partner in the Centres for Learning Programme with Letterkenny Institute of Technology, that resulted in the delivery of accredited third level modules and courses in the FRC. Partnership approaches to provision were an integral part of the FRC's work, with the FRC and Donegal Adult Learner Guidance Service (Co. Donegal Vocational Education Committee) working together to deliver a community based adult guidance service. Not only did this service result in positive impacts for the individuals who used it, the service proved itself to be a valuable way of becoming informed of educational needs within the community, enabling us to organise relevant programmes, while also supporting adults to access programmes outside the community. The success of this service reiterates the necessity of responding in a person-centred way to each individual's needs, which in turn benefits the individual and the wider community.

Providing community education in rural communities affected by a range of socio-economic difficulties necessitates a unique and person-centred course of action. Rather than deciding that a certain course should be run in the community, then organising the course and recruiting through the use of posters, leaflets etc, we strove to provide courses informed by the needs of the community. Such provision begins by building relationships with members of the community, getting

to know them, their hopes, fears and the issues arising in their lives. We sought to build relationships by talking to people when they come into the FRC, stopping to meet people on the street, making contact by telephone and taking advantage of other opportunities to get to know members of the community, including visiting groups who use the centre.

By getting to know members of the community, community development workers and educators get to know the community members' educational, employment, personal or career interests and issues, and which programmes might best respond to their identified needs. When a number of people articulated a common interest, we sought to provide appropriate community based programmes, recruiting additional participants through face-to-face contact or telephone conversations. Programme organisation, design and recruitment were shaped by the needs of the community using a personal or face-to-face approach. This approach also allowed us to become aware of the barriers faced by each individual in accessing education, barriers that often include a lack of confidence, fear, transport difficulties, lack of childcare, motivational issues, previous negative experiences of education, financial costs, family or personal difficulties. In being aware of such barriers we sought to develop our educational programmes to overcome these barriers.

### **Community education programmes for men**

Through meeting male members of the community we realised that many of them wanted something different to the 'typical' community education programmes. There is also recognition within the wider community education sector that men are underrepresented in the programmes. Bearing this in mind, we began to look at programmes we could possibly run for men, in response to the suggestions made by those with whom we talked. We explored existing and successful models, with the Easilift minibus driver programme appearing as a possible option. This programme trained participants as minibus drivers, providing them with a range of related training, including child protection, first aid, passenger assistance training (PATS), minibus emergency evacuation procedures (MEEPS). We felt this programme might be a good option but that it would require some further development in order to meet the needs of our participants.

The men who were interested in returning to education had either left school early, were unemployed or underemployed. Some had also expressed an interest in improving their basic skills. In considering the socio-economic and educational background of our participants and reflecting on their suggestions for



a programme, we felt that a programme for men could include the Easilift training but would need to be adapted to meet the identified needs of the participants. Alongside designing an appropriate programme, we met with possible funders who were willing to work in partnership to co-fund such a programme, as long as it met the requirements of the different agencies.

### **The ‘Accelerate’ programme**

Consequently, we developed the ‘Accelerate Programme’, a minibus driver training programme with a difference. In addition to the driver training which could be delivered with Easilift (theory test preparation, driving lessons, child protection training, basic first aid, Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme (MiDAS), Passenger Assistance Training (PATS), Minibus Emergency Evacuation Procedures (MEEPS), manual handling (objects) Digital Tachograph training and basic vehicle maintenance); we included the ‘Signposts’ module, basic computers, adult guidance and SafePass.

The ‘Signposts’ module was tailored to meet the Specific Learning Outcomes (SLOs) of the FETAC Level Three Communications module, in order to fit with the ethos of the programme and meet the requirements of both the learners and funders. The module had a number of key aims: develop basic skills, prepare learners for employment; provide guidance around educational and career opportunities. In addition to specific learning activities to meet the SLOs of the FETAC L3 Communications module, the ‘Signposts’ module included form filling (theory test, job applications), C.V. preparation, job application procedures and interview preparation. Participants undertook the ‘Pathfinders’ programme (an electronic educational guidance resource) and met with the DALGS guidance counsellor to explore personal progression routes, enabling them to explore their own skills, talents and interests, becoming more aware of the most appropriate educational and employment opportunities. The basic computers module was accredited at FETAC L3 with the Safe Pass training also accredited.

In line with our community education ethos, influenced by Freire, we felt the educators were central to making this programme a positive and transformative learning experience and worked closely with Co. Donegal VEC and Easilift to ensure that we would have the right tutors to deliver the programme. Not all the trainers operated from a community education perspective, but we strived to bring educators in to teach on the programme who would value and respect our adult learners throughout this programme and utilise participative methods.

It is impossible to talk of respect for students, for the dignity that is in the process of coming to be, for the identities that are in the process of construction, without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience, which they bring with them to school. I can in no way underestimate such knowledge. Or what is worse, ridicule it. (Freire, 2001, p. 62)

The ‘Accelerate’ programme began on a cold night in January 2008 with twelve male participants, eleven of whom journeyed through the ten months of varied learning. One participant dropped out as the night the class was held (Wednesday) clashed with the Champions League and no amount of encouragement or support could change his mind. This was important learning for us as an education provider – choose your night carefully! The programme received funding from Co. Donegal VEC, The Department of Social and Family Affairs and FÁS. As with any partnership programme, difficulties can arise with funding and as the participants were not all unemployed, some of the intended funding was withdrawn after the programme began, with implications for our organisation.

Each of the 11 participants passed the FETAC Level 3 modules (Communications and Computer Literacy), passed their D1 minibus driving test and undertook the wide range of Easilift organised training. An external evaluator was hired to evaluate the programme and feedback from the participants, tutors, provider and funders have demonstrated this programme to be highly successful. The programme was also highly commended in the 2009 Aontas National ‘Star’ awards.

### **What’s transformative about teaching people to drive buses?**

One may read this article and question where is the Freirean ethos in teaching people to drive buses? By upskilling people in such a way, are we simply responding to the needs of the economy or are we moving in the direction of individual, community, and eventually social change? There does appear to be a contradiction between the critical, transformative education I have posited as necessary in community development, and the ‘Accelerate’ programme. Upon closer examination it is apparent that there is little contradiction. The methods used to recruit participants, and the design, delivery and support of the programme were influenced by a community development approach, which begins at where the individual is at. Responding to individuals’ needs is necessary to build trust, skills, relationships, and a sense of a collectivity and solidarity as the group develops. The programme had many positive impacts for the participants: increased confidence and skills for

participants; progression into further and higher education programmes and/or employment; employment promotion for some; greater awareness of, and sense of connection to the FRC with participants and their family members participating more in FRC programmes. Such steps can be life-changing for individuals, and are important in the slow and challenging process of community development, paving the way for more critical and collective action.

The ‘Accelerate’ programme may not appear to have had the explicit intention of galvanising participants into action, but it has responded to the needs of its participants, benefiting them, their families, the FRC and the wider community; valuable impacts that contribute to the overall development of the community, laying the foundations for more critical education and action. The evaluation of the programme demonstrated the success of the programme and it reaffirmed the importance of building community education programmes around the needs of the participants, not delivering a one size fits all programme. Programmes such as ‘Accelerate’, are tailored to the needs of the participants, paving the way for critical education through providing positive learning experiences in a supported environment, essential for individuals who may have had negative experiences in the formal education system.

### **Reconciling the perspectives of educators and community activists with the requirements of learners and communities**

Educators with a Freire inspired critical perspective, teaching within apparently uncritical programmes, can foster critical thinking through the use of appropriate materials and pedagogy, enabling participants to collectively and critically analyse their world and become more active – key outcomes of community development. And while critical education is necessary for social change, sometimes learners aren’t ready, willing or interested in becoming critically conscious. Perhaps a positive learning experience, against a backdrop of negative ones, is their priority. And this is where community education in response to the needs of participants is necessary, as Connolly suggests ‘community education is a flexible, emancipatory process which enable people to become more agentic in their own lives, and to bring about change in their worlds’ (2003, p. 9).

Enabling people to become more agentic in their own lives is a central aim of both community education and community development, with this process occurring at each person’s individual pace and in response to their needs. Equally important are the next steps, supporting and encouraging people to become more agentic

in their communities and responsive to wider needs. It is useful for community educators and activists to recognise the differences between the different models of community work practice (Popple, 2000) and be clear on their own position. Community educators and activists operating from a community development model often have to reconcile their critical perspectives with the needs of communities and recognise that personal and social change is slow and requires innovative approaches such as community education programmes such as the 'Accelerate' programme, which could be described as uncritical. Yet such a programme can have more benefits, be life-changing for the individual and their families, and make a greater contribution to the project of social change, than a programme top heavy on social analysis with seemingly little relevance to the participants' life, experiences and interests.

The role of community educators and activists is paramount in programmes such as 'Accelerate' in terms of creating a space to deliver education with a critical content, paving the way for further education, participation in the community and action. Utilising critical materials and discussion topics in a Freire inspired method of co-investigating and problem posing, learners and educators can together develop critical consciousness in a way appropriate to the learners and communities, ultimately moving towards change.

People external to the community provide the catalyst for critical consciousness, community workers are critical pedagogues working in informal educational contexts in community. Our role, through a diversity of projects, is to create the context for questioning that helps local people to make critical connections between their lives and the structures of society that shape their world. The process is one of action and reflection.

(Ledwith, 2007, p. 31)

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# An Educator's Dilemma

ALISON MCCALLION

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## Introduction

After a recent trip to Sweden I was faced with a new dilemma as an educator. How could I incorporate and teach a transformative and political curriculum in tandem with a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 3 module in horticulture? By doing so I hoped I could help the adults I encountered on a daily basis to grow in confidence, to learn, to participate more fully in life and to convince them that collectively we can make a difference to our environment and possibly the world around us.

I was walking through a small town in Sweden called Orebro. It was a medieval town with a castle, quite a quaint and beautiful place. As I wandered down the main street I came to a square and there I stood thinking what a coincidence. I could not believe there in front of me was the Hard Rain Exhibition I had seen in Dublin's National Botanic Gardens. The Hard Rain Exhibition includes stunning photographs illustrating the lyrics of Bob Dylan's classic early song 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall.' Mark Edwards, an internationally acclaimed photographer, devised the Exhibition. His pictures have been seen by millions around the world and depict the related problems of climate change, poverty and environmental destruction.

I had visited this exhibition with a group of women from the Travelling Community only a few months prior and was amazed to see it again in such a small town. At the time in Orebro, I did not quite realise the consequences of this happening for my practice. I had thought it was just a strange coincidence

and had wished that my students had seen it in another country and in a different environment but still starkly sending out the same important message to the people of Sweden.

It was sometime later after journaling my thoughts and reflecting on the experience of seeing the exhibition in Sweden and in Dublin that a new insight into my practice emerged. This would push my practice forward and give me the impetus to experiment once again with my learning to teach and the political teachings of Paulo Freire. The experience of seeing this exhibition twice outside of the classroom unveiled my responsibilities as an educator and the connection that extends beyond the classroom walls between us as human as part of this world.

### **The political curriculum**

I knew from reading Freire's writings that it was possible to make the curriculum political:

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the learner into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it or it becomes the practice of freedom.

(Freire, 1972, p.56)

Before the incidents mentioned above I believed education should be liberating, however, I struggled with making it political. Initially working with students I made a decision not to make the subjects I taught political. I was unsure as to how this was possible; unsure how to make the political teachings of Paulo Freire a reality while teaching in the traditional system of education. However, the visit to Sweden answered some of these questions. Reflecting on the experience in Sweden I realised there was something in this chance happening in Orebro. It seemed I encountered Mezirow's 'disorientating dilemmas';

the disorienting dilemma may be evoked by an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or by one's efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one's presuppositions. Anomalies and dilemmas of which old ways of knowing cannot make sense become catalysts or 'trigger events' that

precipitate critical reflection and transformations.’ Changing social norms can make it much easier to encounter, entertain, and sustain changes in alternative perspectives.

(Mezirow, 1990, p.14)

I wrote about my thoughts and the meaning of the exhibition. I explored the implications for my practice as an educator while teaching horticulture. It has been argued that ‘learning is the transformation of experience into knowledge, skills and attitudes and to recognise this occurs through a variety of processes’ (Jarvis, 1987, p.8). I learned as I reflected on the experiences; while I had seen the Hard Rain exhibition before in Dublin, seeing it in Sweden was somehow different.

My perspective was changing. Mezirow (1990, p.14) states that;

perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.

In Dublin I was somehow disconnected from the exhibition. I had found it disturbing and intriguing but it had failed to connect with me on a personal level. I had failed to make the connection between the pictures and my personal responsibility. Seeing the same exhibition a second time, but this time outside of my role of teacher, I recognised its meaning and saw its significance and power once again. However, this time it was a chance as discussed by Horton and Freire (1990, p. 157);

to know better what they know already. Knowing better means precisely going beyond the common sense in order to begin to discover the reason for the facts.

It seems that venturing out into this world, which I had always believed was beneficial for students, was equally as valuable for me as an educator and as an individual.



### **Uncovering new learning**

Mezirow (1990, p.13) argues that;

by far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection – reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting.

I had become aware now of the many possibilities for learning in life and the connection of these to my profession. Disconnection had been an issue for me. Previously I had been disconnected from the subject of horticulture until I realised that in fact horticulture is part of who I am, part of my fondest memories. My difficulty had been that I perceived the subject as separate to who I am as an educator. Upon realising my connection with the subject it became easier to teach. This connection or disconnection seemed to be surfacing again. I had visited the ‘Hard Rain Exhibition’ in Dublin and had learned a lot but I had not really changed, I had not really taken any responsibility or changed my actions as part of the experience. However seeing the exhibition in a different country, out of context, while out of my role as educator, out of my own environment, I was able to stand back from it and reflect on it in a slightly different way. It suddenly struck me how small the world is and how reliant we are on each other. I am reliant on the people of Sweden to make changes just as much as they are reliant on the people of Ireland. We were connected and I realised the connection between the exhibition and myself. I am part of this world and I have a part to play. I needed to change how I lived my life and how I educated. As a result of this experience I now feel a sense of duty to raise these political and environmental issues in the classroom. A new transformative and political agenda was forming which needed to be incorporated in the classroom but how could I convince the students that this was important?

The answers lay in my own journey of learning that happened with and without the students. The answers had emerged not in the classroom but out participating in the world. We had ventured firstly into the garden and then beyond its walls. I had found an unexpected space for learning for both the students and myself.

### **A different space for learning**

Students enter classrooms and

... bring with them inside of them, in their bodies, in their lives; they bring their hopes, despair, expectations, knowledge, which they got by living, by fighting, by becoming frustrated. Undoubtedly they don't come here empty. They arrive full of things. In most of the cases they bring with them opinions about the world, about life. They bring with them their knowledge.  
(Horton and Freire, 1990, p.157)

However as a result of previous negative experiences of education their personal histories and experiences become suppressed within the four walls of the classroom. I think there may be a case for journeying with the students back out into the very world they live in and have learned in, to create a different space for learning, one where they can re-discover themselves and their responsibilities.

Many adults' previous experiences of education and the classroom have been far from liberating, participative or indeed educational. They learned truths about themselves that were in fact created by the powerful education institutions that they were part of at the time. The adults I have encountered returned to education with literacy difficulties, feeling inferior to others in society; they have not felt whole or capable. Their previous experience of early education, as discussed by Dewey (1997), has been a mis-educative one. His belief that;

all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative... For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.

(Dewey, 1997, p.25)

Their mis-educative experiences have affected more than just their ability to read and write; it has affected their sense of identity, their ability to socialise and voice their opinions. It has affected their confidence, their self-esteem and their participation in life. Finally, it has affected their belief in their ability to learn again.

Those who are labelled slow, weak, dull, stupid and so forth are socialised into a culture of failure and self-blame. Their failure is attributed to an intrinsic characteristic within themselves (lack of ability), and they feel it is a personal weakness or fault of their part. They learn implicitly that the structures of society or of education are not at fault; rather it is the individual who is to blame.

(Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p.235)

If education, as proposed by Freire (1972), is to be truly ‘liberating’ these people need to see not only improvements in their reading and writing, but more importantly they need to believe that they are intelligent, capable and a valuable asset in today’s society. They need to understand the impact their early classroom experiences and society has had on who they are today. Working in a space outside the classroom helped me and my students understand these very things.

### **A curriculum for personal transformation**

Initially teaching horticulture outside the classroom, in the garden, it became obvious students found it easier to be themselves there. Their issues of disconnection, lack of voice and responsibility were less obvious in that environment. By teaching through the medium of the garden it seemed possible that ‘what the educator does in teaching is make it possible for the students to be themselves’ (Horton and Freire, 1990, p.181). Being removed from the classroom seemed to have a positive effect on the students. Themes emerged as a result of comparing how the students were in the classroom and how they were while working in the garden. These themes became the new curriculum for personal transformation. Mayo suggests that ‘committed educators would re-interpret mandates in the light of their own radical agendas and therefore be in and against the state’ (Mayo, 1999, p.137). The student’s personal transformation became the new radical agenda in conjunction with the curriculum. Freire discusses ‘how is it possible before transforming society to deny students the knowledge they need to survive’ (Freire, 1987, p.67). In order to survive students need to learn new subjects and develop their reading and writing; this is one type of knowledge. Is understanding oneself and the role society has played in creating who you are today another knowledge that is needed in order to survive before transforming society? I have found that understanding these issues has helped students combat the effects of their earlier negative experiences of education. As educators can we deny adults this space to uncover this knowledge?

As adults return to education to learn new subject knowledge they return to the physical surrounds of the classroom. This can bring back negative memories of school, where they were labelled 'stupid', and in some cases, raised even more difficult experiences. Being in a classroom was a reminder for them of all of those mis-educative experiences. To combat these memories it seems it is necessary to spend time creating an environment that is safe and conducive to learning. Dewey (1997, p.37) observes;

every experience affects for better or worse the attitudes which help decide the quality of further experiences, by setting up certain preference and aversion, and making it easier or harder to act for this or that end.

However, maybe it is more than creating a safe space within the classroom. Maybe we need to find alternative spaces for learning other than the classroom. From my experience the school garden, the National Botanic Gardens and the 'Hard Rain Exhibition' in Sweden were these types of alternative spaces. Being outdoors had surprising consequences for learning and in fact was a more productive setting for undoing the student's mis-educative experiences of the past. Bringing adult education to more neutral surroundings helped the students and me break free of our oppressive habits of being in the classroom.

### **Finding their voice**

Within the college garden it was easier to invite students into the conversation and they found it easier to participate;

If we wish to hear respondents' stories, then we must invite them into our work as collaborators, sharing control with them, so that together we try to understand what their stories are about.

(Polkinghorne, 1988, p.164)

It seemed a safer place, a place where they were more confident and at ease. Listening to these stories in this environment had many positive outcomes. I found from previous research that acknowledging their stories actually acknowledged the existence of the individual; it helped them to feel valued. As students accessed their memories and told their stories in these more neutral surroundings it led to a deeper understanding of who they were;

The outcomes of our learning are stored in our memories and so memory is crucial to our self-understanding, sense of identity and even to the autonomy and freedom we can exercise. In a real sense our memories are 'the treasures within' (Delors, 1996) that contribute a great deal to making us who we are.

(Jarvis, 2006, p.119)

These stories often hold the key to personal transformation. They voice issues, truths or beliefs that are preventing further growth or personal transformation. I found it is possible through listening to these stories to develop a new radical agenda that can address some of the untruths or distorted beliefs affecting the students' further development. This approach was radical for me because for many years personal transformation in students seemed a mystery or a by-product of education. Now it seems it is possible to deliberately incorporate it as an additional agenda within the classroom.

Often times there are similarities between students' stories. This can create connection where once there was none. It can bond the group and generate new excitement and energy.

As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognising one another's presence.

(Hooks, 1994, p.8)

Through their experience of early education the students I met had become voiceless. Freire refers to this early or traditional educational approach as the 'banking concept' (Freire, 1972, p.46). The banking concept limits the role of the student to listening and storing information that is dictated to them by the educator. Students mentioned they learned from this method of educating; the teacher was always right; questioning was not allowed or discouraged; you listened; did what you were told and opinions were not valued. Sharing stories in the garden initially gives voice to these students who were once oppressed in early education. It can be a first step to healing the damage of those early oppressive experiences and help them to participate more actively in the classroom, and quite possibly, the world.

Students enter the classroom knowing things. As time progresses it becomes safe to share, question and explore their stories both inside and outside the classroom. I think it is important to help the students analyse what they know already and how they came to know it. A method I use is Freire's 'problem posing' (Freire, 1972, p.52). This is described as an educational method which 'embodies communication' (Freire, 1972, p.52) as a two way process. In its simplest form it can be described as when the educator 'turns a statement by the group into a question to be explored' (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989, p.143). An example of this could be asking a student for alternative reasons why they can't spell when they say 'I can't spell because I'm stupid.' Problem posing encourages the process of not taking things for granted, but questioning and investigating. Through this process students 'achieve a deepening awareness of both the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality through action upon it' (Freire, 1972, p.27). By using this technique students challenge their existing assumptions about themselves and their world. As discussed by Mezirow (1990, p.13) 'adulthood is the time for reassessing the assumptions of our formative years that have often resulted in distorted views of reality.' Adult education can be an opportunity, if given the space, to rediscover their suppressed voices and connect with their own power and responsibility.

### **Uncovering our responsibility**

My own personal responsibility to this planet and the other humans inhabiting it began to emerge while out participating in life, with a group of women from the Travelling Community. This was a community programme, which was student led with the curriculum developed to address student needs and interests. As an educator who is humanistic in my approach and believes in a person centred philosophy, with principles;

Such as everyone has the right to belong and be included, everyone has the right to participate and be heard, everyone has the right to freedom of speech and expressions, difference is enriching, and people have the right to question and challenge those in authority.

(Connolly and Ryan, 1999, pp.118-119)

I can reflect these principles on these programmes by designing the curriculum in partnership with the students and by going on outings suggested by the group. I always believed outings were important for many reasons. Like working in the garden, I found it takes the students out of their normal environment, i.e. classroom,

community or area and in some cases takes the students to new places and gives them new experiences to ponder. It is a trip into the unknown and another opportunity to get to know the students on a different level, without the unwanted, possible learned constraints of the classroom. It was an opportunity for learning and conversation. However, the trip to the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin did much more than this. As Freire discusses human beings should be 'treated as subjects who can know and act on the world, whose task is to emerge from their condition ... and to intervene in reality' (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1989, p.34). During this outing something magical happened, the students became the subject and suddenly became aware of their responsibility and their power to impact on their world.

### **Intervening in reality**

As normal I asked the students where they would like to go and they suggested the Botanic Gardens. Coincidentally the Hard Rain Exhibition was in the Gardens at the time. As we ambled through the gardens on that beautiful May day, with the tulips in full bloom, we stumbled across the exhibition lining the pathway between the trees, a perfect setting I thought, which was in stark contrast to the shocking and informative nature of the pictures taken from around the world. The pictures spoke a thousand words and I was reminded of the value of using pictures as a tool for learning, particularly with students who had literacy difficulties. Burns suggests;

Pictures can be used in a variety of ways. First, they can act as a trigger to connect people to experiences and emotions that can open up lines of inquiry and interpretations that might not have been envisaged otherwise. Second, they can be a representation of the subconscious that can help us to conceptualise a system, understand a set of issues and so.

(Burns, 2007, p.117)

I thought afterwards how these pictures could be used in many different ways and Freire (1972) suggests the use of educational methods such as coding and decoding. The educator first gets the group to examine something like an object or picture that is related to their lives. They describe what they see in the picture and then through discussion they are moved to relate what they see to their own lives. Thus the code: the picture in this case, is explored and when related to their life is decoded. By describing what they see, it is non-threatening and it makes them aware of their perceptions about reality. Making the students aware can lead to changes in their perceptions, based upon the discussions. Unknown to me this is in fact what we were doing with these pictures. They raised many issues and as we chatted we

learned from each other. We discussed the issues depicted such as the destruction of the rainforests, tsunamis and global warming. As we discussed these issues, we related it to our own lives and how we lived. We debated how we each contributed to global warming. We discussed our reliance on nature and trees for the very oxygen we breathe and our role in preserving this source of life. I also shared with them the knowledge I had gained a few weeks prior in the gardens, that many trees like these were being used for research in finding cures to diseases such as cancer. Sharing this information with the students helped to re-enforce the benefits of supporting and protecting our environment and our world. This was truly a remarkable space for learning.

All of the pictures at this exhibition posed problems of a different nature from across the world. As we wandered down the pathway through the gardens with no tables or walls to divide or confine us, we discussed the problems posed within these pictures.

Through dialogue, the teacher of the students and the student of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teaches. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.

(Freire, 1972, p.53).

The students drove the conversation through questions, sharing of opinions and ideas. They seemed intrigued by what they saw. Within those gardens there was so much to learn about our world. Now I wonder what other possible learning spaces and opportunities exist in our towns and cities and beyond?

This coincidental happening of the exhibition and the outing worked as a new and different way of learning and there are possibly more of these opportunities available to us if we are tuned into learning happening in this accidental way. This type of expedition and trip out into our world had made the subject of horticulture political, however this had been by chance and it was not at the time a deliberate effort on my part to make the subject so overtly political.

As educator I thought this was a different way of learning and one that could be used again, while teaching other subjects in order to make the curriculum political and transformative, it was a matter of seeking out these new settings and surroundings for learning. It also reminded me of the valuable use of pictures in education and



Freire's (1972) techniques of problem posing and coding and decoding. Now I am working with a new class, teaching horticulture. Our classes are no longer just about the prescribed curriculum and achieving the specified learning outcomes. The subject of horticulture is a political one and its content includes global warming, climate change, our carbon footprint and the steps we can take to make a difference. Throughout this module we discuss environmental issues as raised on the Change.ie website (URL: [www.change.ie](http://www.change.ie))

I couldn't take my new class to the 'Hard Rain Exhibition', so I decided to bring the pictures to the classroom and use them as we did in the gardens, it helped but I still feel being out there in the world made a difference to our learning, somehow it was more real, more relevant and we were connected with the world. My subjects are becoming more political, stemming from my experiences outside of the classroom. I now feel personally responsible and want to make a difference and convince others that they can make a difference too. As Freire states:

Man's ontological vocation is to be a subject, who acts upon and transforms his world, and in doing so moves towards ever-new possibilities of a fuller and richer life individually and collectively.

(Freire, 1972, p.12)

Raising these political issues gives us a choice to act and transform our world and in doing so provides possibilities for improving how we live and the world we live in.

I had missed this overtly political learning opportunity with the students studying horticulture FETAC Level 3 in 2007-2008. I had however seen the benefits of working in the garden. I had seen the students take responsibility for the college gardens, while some took responsibility for their own gardens and some other aspects of their own lives. As the garden grew they seemed to grow too. I had decided not to make these classes political and had decided to focus on the personal transformation of the students. It now seems it was possible to do both.

## Conclusion

As a result of working with students in the garden, engaging with them on different field trips and reflecting on these and my own personal expeditions, I have developed a personal sense of connection with the world. Reflection and action have continued to affect my practice and as Freire (1972, p.42) states ‘those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly’ (Freire, 1972, p.42).

In hindsight from re-examination of the academic subject and myself, I have learned that horticulture opens up many possible avenues of discussion with the students. In fact this subject is an opportunity to learn about our environment and the preservation of our world that is central to our survival. It is also about transforming our world and making our planet a more beautiful place, capable of sustaining life. Through adult education there are opportunities for us as educators to take responsibility for our world and how we live and to convince others that they can do the same.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead (1901-1978)

Now as an educator, my being in this world, my experiences of this world have become more central to how and what I learn, thus impacting on how and what I teach. I have also learned that moving out into this world, while journeying with the students, can have surprising consequences. Working in adult education now is about journeying with students, getting to know them, through the telling of their stories. It is a process whereby we are the subjects to be explored, in tandem with the curriculum. It is about getting to know our world, so that we can participate more fully in it. It is about experiencing the world in the classroom, not just experiencing a subject in isolation to the world. It is about finding new spaces that can unify us and connect us, as we learn how we impact on this world and begin to share the responsibility of being part of this world.

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# An Irish Adult Learner in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Narrative Account of my Experience of Working with Teacher Educators in Lesotho

ROSARII GRIFFIN

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## **The educational context in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Within the African context, educational attainment is, on balance, low. There are many reasons for this. Some of them are as follows: first of all, nutrition. Malnutrition affects one in three children under the age of five. It is difficult to learn even everyday things on an empty stomach. Malnutrition is linked to ill health and ill health is linked to child mortality. Child mortality is still high in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although UNICEF reported that infant mortality rates 'were down' to 9.7 million children (under the age of five) dying in 2006, it was, nevertheless, down from 13 million in 1990. The majority of deaths still occur in Sub-Saharan Africa: 4.8million (BBC, Health Reports, 2009). Already, a proportion of the population never make it to the childhood or adolescent phase, not to mind adulthood. The survivor child might be lucky enough to attend pre-schooling of some kind: but only 14% of children in Sub-Sahara Africa are enrolled in pre-school education. Even if this child were to be enrolled, often the care is more akin to 'babysitting' than any educational-oriented activity going on, such as Montessori.

Once of school age, the net enrolment ratios receiving Universal Primary Education (UPE) have risen since the Dakar (2000) Educational Goals, the ratio rising in Sub-Saharan Africa from 54% to 70% (and in South and West Asia to 86%). A female child in Sub-Saharan Africa is even less likely to attend school, as 55% of females in Sub-Saharan Africa are not enrolled. Hence, gender is an important determining variable in one's educational attainment outside of other obstacles, such as the access and availability of education in the first place, and, as aforementioned, good health. Access to education is not the only problem within the southern African context (though access to *good qual-*

ity education is). The likelihood of a child attending a good quality educational facility is remote, especially if the child lives in the slums or rural areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. African countries that have shown the political will to improve their education systems through the abolition of fees and the construction of schools, have shown greater progress in respect of their UPE enrolment figures. In Sub-Saharan Africa, even if the five year old child survives, and goes to school until the end of primary school, it is unlikely that he – or even she – will progress to secondary school. This is primarily because the secondary school system charges fees which are often too great a financial burden for families to bear. Sub-Saharan Africa shows the lowest rates of secondary school attainment with 75% of the secondary school age cohort of children not enrolled. Therefore, to talk of adult education within the African context, in the sense that we understand it, could be misleading, as most adults – especially in this part of the world – are in need of some kind of basic education in order to attain basic standard levels of literacy and numeracy. Here, adult literacy rates are approximately 55% of the population. Therefore, approximately one in two can read or write. Literacy problems are largely linked to poverty and other forms of disadvantage. In Sub-Saharan Africa, it was noted in the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality Assessment (SACMEC II) that fewer than 25% of grade 6 pupils reached a desirable level of reading, and 10% in six other countries (*cited* in EFA Monitoring Report, 2009, p.5). Unfortunately, African governments are not giving priority to youth and adult learning needs. The political will is just not there; nor is the funding allocated to meet their literacy needs.

To summarise, the situation in Sub-Saharan Africa is such that if you reach adulthood, and lucky enough to have received a quality primary education, then you have ‘beaten the odds.’ If you were to further challenge those odds, and were that one person in four that received a secondary education, you would be in a fairly privileged position, and probably male.

Gender parity is a major issue in Sub-Saharan Africa. Again, poverty and other forms of social disadvantage magnify this. Even within the schooling context, textbooks are often gender biased, teacher attitudes regularly reinforce female negative stereotyping, often hampering female performance (*Ibid.* 2009). The basic infrastructure of schools also tends to be poor, such as the lack of electricity, seats, books and other teaching resources one might be familiar with in a western context. Overcrowding is another huge problem, with enormous

teacher student ratios averaging 1:50 but sometimes greater. Teachers, by and large, tend to be unevenly distributed across regions. In order to achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015, Sub-Saharan African countries need to recruit another 1.6 million teachers. This figure could double if one were to take into account the attrition rates of teachers due to HIV/AIDS, retirement or resignation.

Overall, financing of education within Sub-Saharan Africa is poor, even though it has improved since Dakar (2000). For instance in SSA, eleven out of twenty-one countries spend less than 4% of GNP on education reflecting low political commitment to education. Most donor aid goes towards basic education, meeting UPE goals – and such aid only comes from a handful of donors.

In all, this backdrop paints a gloomy picture of educational attainment in Africa. The relevant EFA Goals in respect of adult education, although not a prominent feature of the EFA Goals or Dakar Agreement, are as follows:

- Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.
- Achieving 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
- Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

(EFA Goals and the Education MDGs, 2000)

Given the above context, I work with an interesting and exceptional (relative to the population profile at large) group of people in Africa. I work with ‘formally educated’ adults. Most of the people I have engaged with in Africa to date are teacher professionals, or those involved in some capacity with teacher education. They form part of the above exceptional group of adults who have survived childhood, survived the educational system, and wish to better themselves and improve their own pedagogical skills which they, in turn, can pass on to their students. This benefits the students in the primary or secondary schools under their care.

Given the contextual background painted above, I realise that I work with a very privileged group, though they may not necessarily be from privileged or well off backgrounds. Teachers, by and large, are not well paid in developing countries. Beginning teachers, for instance, often have to wait months for their start-up salary as the grindingly slow bureaucracy is being sorted out. These teachers have not yet been ravaged by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, but with an estimate of 25% (some argue that this is a conservative estimate) of the adult population in a country like Lesotho who have contracted the virus, it is possible that some teacher educators I work with will die – perhaps during our project-life there. Anyone working on a programme such as ours must try, however painful it may be, to take such possibilities into account.

### **My educational needs assessment visit**

When I went to Lesotho for the first time, with only emails and sporadic communications between myself, the Lesotho College of Education (LCE) and the Ministry for Education and Sport (MES) in advance of this visit, I wondered what lay ahead of me. Coming from an international and comparative educational background, I was very much aware of the fact that I was not familiar with the cultural context outside of reading the various academic articles on Lesotho and other travel material which didn't really give me an insight into the Basotho people *per se*: how they *really* lived; what they thought; how they would perceive me; what influence I would have on their opinions and how that influenced how they related to me; what one could reasonably expect and the limits of what was possible. I decided – out of necessity – that the best way to prepare myself was to try and go with as open a mind as possible.

Similar to my experience, other researchers have found a dearth of literature from Southern contributors within the international journals about educational issues in their home countries (Stubbs, 1999; Stone, 1999). Most of the articles one finds are either written by those who live and work in the North, or by expatriates working in the South. There is very little to be found from the perspectives of indigenous people. This makes one wonder about a) the validity of the current research that is available; b) the reliability of the same research. It also raises questions around the kinds of methodological paradigms one applies in the North but which are not necessarily relevant or applicable or even suitable to the South.

Open-mindedness is not easy to define, as our minds are not, as some philosophical traditions once claimed, *a Tabula Rasa*. Rather, the last thirty odd years have inscribed and imbedded in my mind, my consciousness, certain beliefs about the world we live in and how it operates (Locke, 1977). I live my life according to some ethical principles, and I don't necessary subscribe to the notion of relativity when it comes to what I would perceive as 'universal rights and responsibilities.' Nevertheless, rather than superimpose my fixed and perhaps narrow world view on what it was I was to experience, I felt it would be better to suspend (if that's possible), my own values, beliefs, and even thoughts, and most certainly judgements, but to experience Lesotho, and to use reflective tools such as diaries, log books and my notes according to good qualitative practice for the purpose of evaluation, during and afterwards. In other words, I would use the canons of the qualitative literature to enable me to reflect on my value compass while in Lesotho which would allow me to question every assumption or presupposition I might make. This was how I planned to achieve a state of 'open-mindedness.'

Another way, often recommended by anthropological-informed literature studies, is to write down one's assumptions in advance, and to reflect on these in the light of the various realities one encounters (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I did not do that in any systematic way, apart from reflecting mentally on it, because all I really knew was that I did not know what to expect, outside of the oft morbid facts that one reads about in development literature (as afore-described). I knew from past visits – albeit to different African countries – that while this may be true, such poverty is not often witnessed by the naked eye. Poverty is often concealed by people who are struggling to maintain their dignity and right to live in the world. It is not something they have on a poster board around their necks. Other times, poverty is blatantly obvious, particularly in comparison to western material standards. Nevertheless, I preferred to imagine – without being idealistic or unrealistic – that I was going to encounter a new reality, outside of the realm of abject consumerism, something more akin to Ireland's recent history perhaps of fifty years ago. What I did bear in mind was President Mary McAleese's phrase when she spoke about Ireland being 'a first world country, with a third world memory' ([www.IAPRCB.ie/Conference/Proceedings](http://www.IAPRCB.ie/Conference/Proceedings)). *Above all, I knew I was looking forward to going back to Africa.* I was looking forward to meeting the people, embracing another way of life, soaking up the bright sunshine, and listening to what it was my African counterparts had to say.



Before I left, I got some advice from a priest-friend who worked for over forty years in Africa. He said: ‘just because the people in Uganda (and Lesotho) speak English and you speak English, don’t assume you are going to understand what is being said. Their way of viewing, describing and interpreting the world – though using English, might mean something totally different to what you imagine. Don’t make the mistake of assuming you know what’s being said.’ Basically, my friend was advising me not to let the mutually spoken English language fool me into a false sense of security about how the world is from their perspective. A friend reminded me of what George Bernard Shaw thought about this when he described England and the USA as ‘two nations divided by a common language.’ I thought about this from an Anglo-Irish perspective, and our Irish way of using English, which can also be used in a totally different sense to our English counterparts. This was one of the biggest shocks to my system when I went to read for my doctorate in England. I had foolishly assumed, because I was English-speaking, and from a neighbouring island, that communication would not be a problem (the fact that it might have been didn’t even enter my head). I naturally assumed it would not be a problem. I was so very wrong. In fact, I had a far more difficult time than my international counterparts who spoke English as a second language (they had the added advantage of expecting to experience difficulties). Eventually, I realised that my supervisor and I were on totally different channels even though we used the same language to communicate. He did not comprehend the language I spoke in the way that I intended it to be understood. This baffled me initially, but later, I understood it because language, like everything else, is culturally embedded. This was perhaps the single biggest lesson I learned when undertaking international and comparative studies. My second biggest lesson was never to assume anything! Therefore, when my Irish colleague advised me on this issue vis-à-vis Africa, I immediately understood his point.

When I got to Maseru, it was as I had thought it might have been, reasonably well developed, with the evidence of colonialism with regular western style housing, infrastructure and shops. In spite of what I knew to be the situation in respect of poverty, and Lesotho is one of the most materially impoverished societies in Sub-Saharan Africa (as aforementioned), the experience of arriving in Maseru was no different in some respects to arriving in Tipperary town, Sligo or Ballinasloe. Like a medium sized town, or small capital city, it was spaciouly laid out, without evidence of too much industrialised activity or wealth, but nevertheless, pleasant to be there and a warm welcoming attitude palpable.

When I got to my lodge, Lancer's Inn, the electricity was gone. Apparently South Africa had greater demands on electricity which often left dependent Lesotho without regular supplies. Power was generally cut for certain hours of the day. The intermittency of electricity in Lesotho was a regular feature of life. It could happen anytime. It was easy to adapt to once one expected it. However, one was conscious that in the foothills and highlands, there was no electricity, running water or bathroom facilities. So, the shortage of electricity from time to time was merely a minor inconvenience.

When I got to the Lesotho College of Education, I was greeted by the Rector and the Vice-President for Research and Planning. Numerous meetings had been arranged during the week between Education Faculty staff – lecturers who worked on campus and some distant lecturers on a DTEP course (Distant Teacher Education Programme). DTEP educators spent considerable amounts of time in the foothills and highlands teaching, tutoring and involved in teacher practice sessions (supervising trainee teachers). The Lesotho College of Education had a second campus in the Centre of the country, in a place called Thaba-Tseka. I visited this campus and met the staff here too. They were extremely innovative in their teaching methods especially given the very poor internet facilities they had. I could see how creative thinking thrives when needs must. Nevertheless, there is an optimal level before teachers become demotivated. No more than in the western context, teachers get disillusioned if their basic needs are not met and when tireless efforts are not appreciated or dismissed as irrelevant.

The needs assessment exercise was conducted quite quickly. Interested staff attended prearranged sessions if they were interested in getting involved in collaborating on research projects with their Irish counterparts. I did not have any project topic(s) in mind, rather I sought ideas from the group on areas that was of relevance to a) their own professional teaching practice, b) the Lesotho National Education Sector Plan, and/or c) of interest to Lesotho College of Education in respect of their own Strategic plan. It was pretty much an open playing field, except that I did mention that the projects would have to be linked in some way to 'teaching and learning' objectives. The faculty staff seemed pleased, and immediately there was a discussion, chaired by the VP for Research Planning, on topics of interest. Ideas were discussed; people with expertise on each topic identified, and finally, an agreed list of eight to twelve topics was identified. Over the course of the week, several more meetings were held, each of approximately two hours duration, and finally, the list was whittled down to two main topics, with three

others on reserve should the Centre get further funding, then these topics would be the source of further investigation at that stage. This whole funnelling process appeared to work very well. It appeared to be democratic. Everybody got their say. As such, the ideas I had about the Needs Assessment Exercise were ruled by the following principles:

I wanted the choosing of topics to be a collaborative effort, with both the agreement of staff, the right level of expertise on board, and also, with the blessing of the Ministry of Education and Sport, the Permanent Secretary whom I had the pleasure of meeting and discussing the topics identified with them for their tacit approval. I also had discussions with the Education Officer in Irish Aid in order to keep it informed about progress, and also to listen to what its members had to say in respect of the chosen topics.

The LCE Vice President for Research Planning laid out the matter and asked for expressions of interest in their own areas. I felt, from observing the dynamics of the meeting, that it appeared to be a democratic process. Everyone present was asked their viewpoint. Somebody from the floor was allocated to write the minutes. The minutes were verbally recited back at the end of the meeting. Corrections were made. Action points were agreed upon or modified.

Attendance at the meetings was also indicative of the level of interest. This interest was sustained. Those who could not attend meetings sent apologies, and arrived at subsequent meetings. There was a great buzz, momentum and excitement around the fact that there was an open floor, a relatively open agenda, and an opportunity to become involved, as a group, with international members, on a research project.

Of course, this was not LCE's first time being involved in international projects. They had previously been involved in the DELPHE project with the UK and Durham University. So, in a sense, what I was bringing to the table was not anything new *per se*. However, as nobody was remunerated to show up, or – as far as one could ascertain – induced to be there, it appeared that the enthusiasm was infectious. This was reflected in the level of participation at meetings, subsequent meetings, and in signing up to various teams attached to each project.

We also offered PhD Scholarships (independent of the projects) to LCE staff who were interested in progressing professionally to doctoral level. This too had a huge interest and uptake. Detailed applications with expressions of interest were submitted by the end of my stay, and a panel of 5 including independent personnel from the National University of Lesotho (NUL) put together the kind of criteria required. The selection process took place after my visit, and the candidates and their related topic chosen appeared worthy of the scholarship funding.

Again, it would be naive to think that there were no background politics (micro-politics) during my visit. I had no ‘insider knowledge’ *per se*. I did not have a ‘mole in the camp.’ I could only judge from the reactions, presence and informal conversations which followed each meeting. No doubt there were different vested interests at play, and people wanted their own subject-areas highlighted, especially if there were the possibility of extra resource funding, trips abroad, and possible remuneration for extra work undertaken on the project (though none of these were either promised or mentioned). Nevertheless, previous donors would have a legacy of similar goods and services, and therefore that perception may have been there. All this might be true. However, if so, they were very good at hiding ulterior motives, or maybe they were interested in their own professional development. In any case, my experience of working with the Basotho people was akin to that which I read by other researchers who conducted work in Lesotho – a very positive experience.

Instead, I had the sense in LCE and Lesotho that people were glad to have some external bodies taking an interest in their work and welfare and progress, and the Basotho people could shape these projects according to their own needs and specifications. I felt confident of the commitment on behalf of LCE and its colleagues, and I also felt confident that the projects finally arrived at were of mutual interest to both our Centre and LCE; that the expertise was available in both camps, and that it would be a major collaborative effort on both sides that we hoped would be of mutual benefit. For this reason, I looked forward to the follow up session which was to be held in Ireland some months later.

Reflections on the notion of ‘educational development’; being an ‘outsider researcher’ and the notion of ‘donor-led funded’ research. Prior to my needs assessment trip to Lesotho, I had done some extensive reading on the whole notion of ‘educational development’, ‘education for development’, ‘education for sustainable development’; the contestable concept of ‘development’ itself: devel-

opment for whom? The nature of development: is development a good thing? How does one define 'good'? Development – to and for what end or purpose? What does 'sustainable' mean? How can one ensure the sustainability of educational development? Who is driving the development agenda, and why? (Tucker, 1999; Sadar, 1999; Munck and O'Hearn, 1999; Tanaka, 2005; Timmons Roberts and Bellone Hite, 2007). In fact, this whole area itself comes down to the notion of power and power relations, and how these are handled and whether or not power can ever really be truly democratic when the resources are heavily weighed on one side – the donor side – is a contestable area. Without going into the arguments for and against, I'd rather just acknowledge at this point that such questions have been raised, considered and are not fully resolved nor may ever be. Suffice to say that it is a contestable area, and whether we can ever act without prejudice regarding our own ethnocentric assumptions, ideals and values is indeed doubtful, even with the best of intentions. Nevertheless, if one were to examine and reflect upon one's own ideological persuasions, and examine these in a dispassionate way, inviting the critique of others, and opening up our work to the world regarding our peers, our Southern Partners, our colleagues for greater scrutiny, then it is less likely to be prejudiced or self-serving, or at least, such weaknesses in any research can at least then be highlighted.

While the development debates were all to the foremost of my mind before and during and following my field trip to Lesotho – especially the concept of development itself – questions such as 'whether what I was embarking on had even any relevance to Lesotho, my Basotho colleagues, their own interests, development or progress?' haunted me and weighed heavily on my conscience. Nevertheless, while considering all the debates, I decided to 'park' them, as I still had a job to get on with. Instead, I decided to take my priest friend's advice – he who had spent half his life in Africa – which was to listen, learn, and most of all, not to assume that I understood what was being said – therefore, not to assume one understands immediately, but rather to question everything (not literally of course) but rather to suspend judgements, conclusions, assumptions for further consideration, observation and clarification. He encouraged me to learn as much as I could from my African counterparts, as I would have a lot to learn from them. I knew instinctively he was right. This also concurred with the indigenous literature I had read on working within an African context, books such as that of Musaaazi (1986) *Planning and Development in Education: African Perspectives.*

Similarly, in respect of being an outsider to the research context, there is a huge amount of literature on this area (O'Sullivan, 1999; Bridges, 2001; Lincoln and Guba; 1985). Such authors discuss both the advantages and limitations of being a 'cultural stranger' within a research context (O'Sullivan, 1999). Broadly, it can be advantageous when a context is looked at with 'fresh eyes.' New paradigms can be used to describe familiar phenomena. Different approaches can illuminate new insights, giving 'insiders' a fresh perspective on their work, values, mores and *modus operandi*. The downside of course is that nuances can be missed; observations can be misinterpreted; and a different value system may be assumed to apply to different contexts (the American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead's controversial findings in respect of sexual attitudes and mores within the South Pacific and Southeast Asian traditional cultures is a case in point). Where this becomes most obvious is the raw adaption of reform measures in education which work wonderfully in one context, and which fail miserably in another. The discipline of international and comparative education likes to especially focus on this issue. And to move it a step further, the work of such authors of Tanaka (2005) and Schweisfurth (2002) critically examine whether or not the cross-cultural transfer of educational concepts and practices is a good thing; and how these can be applied, and what precautions need to be taken. Contextual factors and the mediation of policy at the national, regional and local levels often do not take cognisance of the 'host' or 'receiving' countries' cultural, historical, geographical, demographic; religious and political histories (Griffin, 2001). The chances therefore of a successful application of another country's initiatives are doubtful. A good example of this is the adoption of, for instance, market oriented educational policies, cross nationally, particularly between the UK and the USA (commonly referred to as the 'transatlantic dialogue' (Phillips, 2002), without any regard for the cultural context when such initiatives are 'parachuted in'). Evidence showed that the mediation of such policies was thwarted to satisfy different interests at the various stages of implementation (*Ibid.*, 2001; Griffin, 1998). Hence, unsurprisingly, the end result of the implementation of similar policies in different countries varied enormously.

Within the Lesotho context, I found that being funded by Irish Aid had resonated positively with the local community. I was informed that this was primarily as a result of the impact on Lesotho of the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa. When this happened, a number of large donor agencies which had worked in Lesotho left permanently and moved to South Africa immediately, leaving the Basotho people feeling somewhat abandoned. However, Irish Aid retained their

presence in Lesotho, and their level of support. For this reason, Irish Aid was perceived locally as ‘being there for the long haul’, and not going where it was developmentally popular to be. Another more cynical viewpoint that was put to me threw a different angle on this: ‘Irish Aid were still giving money, therefore, they were still welcome of course.’ Though true, I was often taken by surprise at the level of appreciation and respect that my Basotho colleagues had for Irish Aid, and what it represented. Perhaps both viewpoints can be held in parallel.

There are some obvious ethical considerations around working with donor funding *i.e.* the research must maintain its own integrity; findings must not be unduly influenced by the wishes, desires or prejudices of the donor; reports must not be skewed unnecessarily/unnaturally to fit various categories of deliverables, outputs or whatever measurement are put in place by the donor. Nor should weaknesses of the research or limitations of its effects be minimised for fear of lack of further funding, etc. While it is important to stay within the parameters of the research proposal which was originally funded, it may be necessary to go outside strict parameters to achieve a better result. On the other hand, this must be balanced with the donor’s obligation to the public to monitor and evaluate the projects and its funding to ensure the best ‘value for money’ and returns to all those who are expected to benefit from the project’s work.

Large donor funding agencies have been criticised for superimposing their own paradigms on indigenous communities which are powerless to resist pressures from their own government or the international agenda. Here, I make specific reference to the work of Joseph Stiglitz (2006) and the negative impact (environmentally, socially and culturally) of IMF and/or World Bank countries on the poorest of the poor. Here, I also wish to refer to the abject failure of the superimposed Structural Adjustment Programmes which had a disastrous effect on entire countries’ economies. Even when such failures became apparent, such donors still continued with their beleaguered policies. Some argued that this was primarily because such policies were devised by economists devoid of any sense of cultural awareness or sensitivity to the issues at the grassroots level. For well over a decade (in virtually every discipline) the research-based evidence in the literature which highlighted the problems and failures of SAPs was overwhelming. Economic policies, it appears, do not operate in isolation from other aspects of human endeavour.

Although Irish Aid is not one of the major players in the development arena, such as USAID, Ford, Rockefeller Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation or the UN bodies, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, or even DFID, nevertheless, they have had a steady impact on the ground, and that impact is growing through forging greater strategic alliances with different Ministries and institutions, including Higher Education Institutions. So far, Irish Aid's approach has been to allow HEI's apply for Strategic Cooperation Funding that is aimed at building research capacity in Ireland vis-à-vis Africa (and various IA development initiatives going on there). The second prong of Irish Aid's approach is for Irish HEIs to work with their African counterparts to help build research capacity in Africa, with the ultimate goal of poverty reduction through, for instance, encouraging good governance in education, so that the goods may be shared by the general public (EFA Monitoring Report, 2009). Although Irish Aid's latest policy is to work with Ministries (and there are mixed opinions as to whether this is the most effective way to tackle educational disadvantage, given the excellent work some NGOs do, such as 80:20) nevertheless, it is a policy that helps to forge good relations between African Governments and the Irish Government – by placing trust in its systems. Those who have worked in Africa for years often argue that this can be an ineffective way of working for reasons already mentioned. Suffice to say, Irish Aid also funds such NGOs as 80:20 and others on the ground who work at the grassroots level, in order to have a wider practical influence. At this point, it must be said that Irish Aid is also in the course of reviewing its own strategic goals and plans. What future direction is taken from a policy perspective remains to be seen.

### **Thoughts for the future of the 'Adult Learner' within the African context**

At this point, it is important to point out that Adult Education is not a priority in any of the major educational agreements dealing with developing countries – neither primarily in the Dakar Agreement of 2000 or the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In fact, adult education barely gets a mention. Nevertheless, in the beginning of my paper, I wrote that approximately half the adults in sub-Saharan Africa are functionally illiterate. In spite of this, the main focus of governments is currently on achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE). This is certainly the focus in Lesotho. This of course is laudable and necessary in order to prevent the next generation from becoming lost by entering that 'culture of silence' that Paulo Freire wrote so passionately about. Nevertheless, we cannot afford to ignore or disenfranchise and consider as doomed this generation of adults. Informal and non-formal education gets little attention, simply because



of the priority being placed on UPE at the moment following the MDGs. The exception is however within the NGO sector, which although is less well funded than other organisations who work with the formal sector, does try to work with communities and encourage informal and non-formal education. This is often linked vocationally to apprenticeship or training.

Within the area of comparative and international education, Professor Lalage Bown wrote that the first conference in the UK by BCIES (British Comparative and International Education Society) that focused on the comparative study of adult education was held in 1986. The first international conference on this topic was held in Exeter, New Hampshire, USA in 1966 which met to 'review and refine a framework for examining adult education activities, programmes and institutions in various countries on a comparative basis and to examine and describe similarities and differences in such activities in line with this conceptual framework' (Bown, 1986 *citing* Liverright and Haygood, 1968, p.57). Bown stated that adult education had, in fact, a long history in Exeter, USA and that as early as 1918, a voluntary organisation called the 'World Association for Adult Education' was set up. This was led by a British enthusiast Albert Mansbridge. In the UK, the best known English advocate was Robert Peers who held the Chair of Adult Education in the University of Nottingham from 1923-1953 (*Ibid.*, 1986).

UNESCO and the World Bank had been active in the promotion of Adult Education worldwide. The 1985 Conference in Paris on adult education had certain staff members, such as Paul Lengrand who promoted the idea of 'lifelong learning' (*Ibid.* 1986, *citing* Lengrand, 1975). Other notables were Ettore Gelpi who was interested in the idea of lifelong learning and work (*Ibid.*, 1986, *citing* Gelpi, 1978) and Faure (*Ibid.* 1986 *citing* Faure, 1972) who wrote the seminal piece of work *Learning to Be*, promoting a new model of lifelong learning gleaned from examining all the various models which were in operation across Europe at that time. Since then, the notion of lifelong learning has gone from strength to strength, and this past decade has been the decade of lifelong learning. Such concepts were also promoted by organisations such as the OECD which advocated the importance of outputs (learning) rather than the inputs (education, training, and self-study). To a large extent, this illustrates how the neo-liberal agenda, the marketisation of education, and the promotion of the commodification of education have become part of the national agenda. Given that we live in a modern economy, the new emphasis was not really on education for education's sake, but rather on the continuing acquisition of knowledge (OECD, 2004). The recent

White Paper, *Learning for Life* illustrates how such ideas were to be transposed into a national context. For instance, the ICTU's website stated quite clearly that the main driving forces behind the lifelong movement in Ireland were: the influence of EU policies and streamlining effects of EU programmes; globalisation and industrial restructuring; focus on partnership as a problem-solving tool, and; union led EU projects as promoters of change ([www.ictu.ie/learning/lifelong](http://www.ictu.ie/learning/lifelong)). Given that we are now told that we live in 'a knowledge economy', education and lifelong is no longer seen as a privilege and luxury, but a necessity in order to survive in today's world. In Africa, the situation is somewhat different though it is impacted by similar forces from the west. Hence, neo-liberalism has created an even greater chasm between the North and South. This chasm may eventually be bridged by modern technology. However, we are a long way from that right now. The issue in Africa has to do with school leavers from primary education who have little or no opportunity to go on to second level schooling because of school fees. Even the quality of education they receive up to this point may be dubious. Hence, one has a lot of illiteracy, and there is a desperate need to raise the basic standard of education. There is a dearth of services to operate within the community to capture this cohort of people who have been more or less abandoned by the formal system of schooling.

Two factors, again identified by Bown, which are crucial to the success of any adult education and lifelong programmes to succeed within the African context are: a) the political will through policy making, and b) the political will through public opinion. She cites the example of Nigeria where the National Open University which was opened in 1983 was in jeopardy after one year of operation, and was suspended in 1984. The political will, she claims, was not there to sustain it, and media opposition to the NOU created the climate for its suspension, which was not helpful. On the other hand, Uganda's Makerere University has an excellent Centre for Continuing Education which has been very successful in mobilising itself to deal with second chance learners akin to the Nigerian situation. In contrast, the political will is there to sustain it (though unsurprisingly, it did decline during the Idi Amin years). In Lesotho, there is an outreach centre as part of the NUL campus which deals very effectively with adult education and lifelong learning. It offers courses and outreach centres right across the country, though many are poorly resourced. Similarly, Lesotho College of Education, as part of the teacher training/education programme, operates the aforementioned four year part-time degree called DTEP (Distant Teacher Education Programmes) which takes cognisance of the rural community and environment, and offers its teach-

er education services on an outreach basis. The equivalent full time on-campus degree takes three years. The DTEP programme is very successful and has been running a number of years. I visited one of its outreach centres in Lesotho, in Thaba-Tseka, and was very impressed by their ability to maximize their creativity despite meager resources.

In Africa, adult education has been seen as marginal, both in relation to public policy and government priorities (Adult Education Report, 2006). More work could be done on the relationship between the role of the state and its relationship to adult education. Infrastructure to support this kind of activity might include the building of local libraries, the support of local ACE communities and programmes, cultural festivals and museums, to mention but a few ways in which governments can be proactive. Bown (*Op. Cit.*) recalled in her article how adult education thrived in Britain with the lifting of taxes on newspapers, the public financing of libraries and the development of freely accessible museums (p.73). Of course governments often fear the political mobilisation of its adult citizens should they become educated, where they are enabled to shake off the shackles of poverty, the culture of silence, and where they can find their voice to express their opinions, will, demands. The kind of social unrest that sometimes comes with 'consciencisation' happens, but this is no more than a democratic demand for government to be accountable to and for its citizens (Bown, 1986; Freire, 1977).

African society will not be able to progress in a modern economy should they not have the skills to participate in the new world order, which may confine Africa to a permanent state of under-development, underachievement; under-utilisation of its resources, and the constant exploitation by others to satisfy their needs. If from no other perspective but from a universal rights' perspective, each child, each adult, each individual in Africa deserves the right to develop their own abilities and potentials, in freedom, in peace and in harmony. Education, 'a drawing out' enactment, can contribute positively to Africa's realisation of this potential. Education, and particularly adult education, may enable Lesotho, for instance, less dependent on South Africa, and become master of its own destiny politically, economically, socially, and culturally.

### **Epilogue: From an Irish perspective**

Meanwhile, I, as an Irish adult learner, will continue to learn, listen, and not assume, as I go about discovering and enjoying Africa which has brought me so much joy, insights about myself and myself in relation others, some of which I

have shared with you here. Inter alia, my experiences to date have taught me one important lesson: we have far more in common with our Basotho colleagues – a shared British colonial past, a similar sense of humor, an easy-going, flexible and adaptable approach to life, to problems and to living, a similar love of folk-lore, of music and song, than anything that divides us. The one sharp differential of course (aka the elephant in the room) is our life chances in respect of health and longevity, and wealth which enable *me* to have greater control over my life and destiny. It is this chasm that I strive to bridge in my own small way.

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# Connecting Family Learning and Active Citizenship

MARY FLANAGAN

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## Introduction

In Ireland family learning and active citizenship has not been linked together until 2006. It was while the Clare Family Learning Project was involved in a family learning EU learning network project, that a suggestion to create a new partnership project linking both areas was made and FACE IT! was born (Families and Active Citizenship Education – an Integrated Training, [www.faceitproject.org](http://www.faceitproject.org)). FACE IT! was a two year European Project, funded through the Socrates programme from October 2006 to September 2008. In response to recent political developments in Romania the host partner, EuroEd, initiated the project to provide education for democracy. The experience of making decisions locally was new to a generation of people. The family leads and guides children and targeting parents was felt the best option to create awareness and develop skills for active citizenship.

A central aim of family learning is to value the learning that happens in a very natural way in the home and family. Parents are children's first and most important teachers and the values, attitudes and culture that are learned from the family stay with each individual throughout their life.

Family learning is informal by nature...outcomes include the development of skills and knowledge that are relevant to life in a modern society: learning about roles, how to take responsibility and make decisions in relation to a wider society in which the family is a foundation for citizenship.... The learning journeys of families may vary but if this course provision enables them to see that working and learning together as a family can be fun and fulfilling, then this may be viewed as a first step to active citizenship.

(FACE IT! Handbook, 2008 p.3).

Family learning has been successful in widening participation particularly among families experiencing the disadvantages of educational underachievement, low self-esteem, and poor life chances. It has the capacity to improve learning for adults and their children through building confidence. By using family learning to deliver active citizenship, families are empowered to get more involved in the life of their local community as well as to recognise their own important role in the development of their locality.

### **FACE IT! Project**

A partnership of eleven organisations from six countries was involved in the work of the project. The FACE IT! approach provided a unique opportunity for partners to work on the development of training and materials. The wealth of knowledge, skills and experience ensured that there was a well-rounded approach to family learning and active citizenship. As a result of the provision of international and national training in Europe, the FACE IT! project maximised the potential for cascading the central message to families. It provided an innovative approach to meeting the needs of migrant/socially isolated and disadvantaged families who require support to become more informed and active citizens. It was developed in the following stages:

- Project meetings to share practice, plan training events and develop website support.
- International trainer training events in Ireland and France.
- Cascaded national/regional/local training events in Ireland, France, Romania and Italy.
- Project meetings to share outcomes from training and to collate materials for dissemination through the handbook, CD Rom and website.
- The organisation of an integrated training and international conference with three equally important components: learning, promoting and networking.
- The FACE IT! project culminated with the launch of the handbook at a conference in Romania in July 2008.

(FACE IT! Handbook, 2008, p.6)

At the first project meeting, getting the group to agree common ground on how to develop the project at one stage seemed an impossible task. We discovered that not only did Romania (the partnership host country) not have any family learning or active citizenship programmes, there was no adult education service. EuroEd, had seen on a previous Grundtvig project, the usefulness of fam-

ily learning as a way of engaging with parents. We needed to engage with those working in social and community work as well as teacher training to deliver the programme to parents. This meant including adult education methodologies in addition to the core elements, as formal education in Romania is delivered in a more didactic fashion.

The training programme focused on increasing families' skills and knowledge in the areas of active citizenship and participatory democracy competencies, such as:

- Awareness of their rights and responsibilities as citizens
- Being informed about the social and political world
- Being concerned about the welfare of others
- Being able to articulate their opinions and arguments
- Raising the relevance of participation to the families' own lives
- Being active in their communities
- Being responsible in how they act as citizens

The training programme was developed by the FACE IT! partners with experience in designing materials to attract hard to reach learners and bringing disadvantaged and isolated families into education. It offered the opportunity for professionals working in a range of community settings to become involved with family learning and intergenerational learning. It included methods and easy to use materials for a non-threatening and empowering non-formal/informal learning (family learning).

### **Clare involvement**

The Clare Family Learning Project led discussions on curriculum development for the training course. They successfully applied to the EU to run the training as a Grundtvig Training for Trainers. The course *How to develop a family approach to active citizenship* was delivered in Ennis to an international group of 22 in November 2007 and to a national training group of 15 in February 2008. A cascaded training programme also took place in Ennis to a local group of eight in May 2008 and to a group of ten in October 2008. Two groups of learners (13 men and 12 women) attended active citizenship courses locally up to December 2008.



### ***Adult learning methodologies***

The participants lived experience was used as a starting point, valuing the existing knowledge within the group. Facilitation included the use of a wide variety of methods to suit visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles and to maintain interest during the sessions. These included:

- Workshops
- Group work
- Study Circles
- Role-play
- Blended learning using computers and internet
- Experiential learning
- Self-reflection
- Walking debates
- Autobiographical copybooks
- Case studies
- Course work

### **Training**

The main outcome of project FACE IT! was a wave of international trainer training followed by training at national level. The international training was held in France (Marseille), Ireland (Ennis) and Romania (Iasi) in November 2007 and included three days face to face training and two days online pre and post training with national training taking place in these three countries and Italy in Spring 2008. Participants at these events have found the materials to be flexible and very suitable for modification according to the diverse needs of learners.

### **Handbook**

The aim of the project and handbook was to encourage practitioners across Europe to engage with the FACE IT! approach to active citizenship and family learning as a mechanism for meeting the lifelong learning needs and encouraging civic participation of isolated, hard-to-reach, passive or disadvantaged group. All the materials of the training programme, the experience of its delivery in the project countries, and background information and research on family learning / active citizenship make up the contents of the FACE IT! handbook. This material is available online to download at [www.faceitproject.org/index.html](http://www.faceitproject.org/index.html)

### ***Pilot Project***

A pilot project was developed by The Clare Family Learning project and piloted in Ennis in 2007, just prior to the national elections in May. Topics can be downloaded from the website at <http://www.clarefamilylearning.org/course/12>. Three groups of learners were involved using an integrated approach.

Results of running the pilot project in Clare Family Learning Project show the active engagement of learners in the active citizenship process. The outcomes of this included:

- Six learners voted for the first time as a result of attending the classes
- Some learners identified issues for local action
- All learners asked questions and raised issues with the local politicians
- Learners were observed engaging in political discussion among themselves
- All learners reported greater understanding and enthusiasm for becoming more active citizens

One of the Clare pilot groups, a Traveller Parent Support Group, were very engaged in the activities and found themselves developing a book of their own lived history and experiences in order to pass that knowledge on to the next generation. The recent past has seen huge changes in the lives of Travellers, and the parents in this group were eager to have an input into the future lives of their children. This book Traveller Life is available from Clare Family Learning Project.

### **Unexpected outcomes**

The standard of second and third languages used at the project meetings was embarrassing for some of the Irish attending. It would inspire participants to make another effort to learn a European language.

At times during the first project meeting, those familiar with family learning were frustrated by the amount of time spent discussing the use of the internet as a marketing and dissemination tool, as the project had yet to begin. FACE IT! did take up a lot of our time, but I can say that The Clare Family Learning Project benefited in equal to the effort put we into the work. We learned many things as the project progressed, not just that family learning and active citizenship can work well together and develop into a top quality training programme. As original Grundtvig projects were probably intended, we learned

about other countries and their cultures, peoples' histories and struggles especially in less well off countries, eventually discovering friendships and that people have families and similar worries and hopes for them in every country.

### ***Reflection***

We are confident that similar outcomes can be duplicated across Europe as a result of the cascading effect of the FACE IT! training. Tutors have been trained and can adapt the handbook contents to suit the needs of the group. Parents will have the opportunity to become more aware, more active and learn to become critical thinkers.

The FACE IT! project was very ambitious with a heavy schedule of tasks within a very short two-year framework. At first it appeared that it was mainly those who had access to adult learners and practitioners in family learning who would be able to deliver the training. Some members of the partnership were experts in specific areas, such as information technology but had no access to groups. This seemed very frustrating and challenging at the start, but as the project grew we reaped the benefits of having a wider skills set in the group. Knowing who was willing and able to carry out specific roles in advance of a partnership starting, could have helped ease a 'stormy' first meeting.

Having a host partner, with a lot of experience working on other EU projects certainly helped the project to succeed and drive the work at the required momentum. The opportunity to engage with experts in fields normally not part of our work was of great benefit to project participants. In this case The Clare Family Learning Project had access to expertise in active citizenship, evaluation, website development and internet dissemination. Some members of the project had years of experience hosting EU projects, while others were involved in adult education at national level in their own countries.

For many learners, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, seeing a course advertised as Active Citizenship may not immediately appeal. Active Citizenship is a difficult concept to grasp and the title of the course may need to be changed. For local groups *Getting to know your community* and for those new to Ireland *Living in Ireland* could be used as alternative titles. Learning from our own pilot project showed that integrating an active citizenship course into an existing group is a good option. For example, getting a two hour slot once a week for six to eight weeks has been a successful way of reaching a Youthreach Progression group.

### **Conclusion**

As citizenship is one of the key pillars in the Irish Government's 'Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education' (2000), having a programme developed and ready to adapt and deliver to suit a groups needs, encourages tutors to include citizenship as part and parcel of their adult education work. The FACE IT! project work appeals to adult education providers because of its emphasis on best practice in the appropriate methodologies, activities and blended learning as used in the training. Evaluations have shown the training content is both relevant and interesting for trainees and their target families once they have got the opportunity to experience it. The FACE IT! training programme is easily transferable as any country could take up these themes and develop their own programme to meet the needs of their individual target groups.

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# Reviewing the Evidence on How Adult Students Learn: An Examination of Knowles' Model of Andragogy

VALERIE MCGRATH

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The rationale for writing on this topic area came about from my experience with teaching adults on a variety of evening programmes. Students from a variety of backgrounds tend to enrol on business type courses that are accredited by the Institute of Commercial Management and Institute of Public Administration. In some cases, the students in these courses left education at a young age, often before they had completed secondary education, often due to not being comfortable with the teaching style that was adopted by the teacher in the classroom. Students felt that the teaching style did not promote learning in the classroom and that students were not allowed to question the material discussed in the classroom. When these students enrolled in evening programmes they were often surprised that they were allowed to contribute to discussions in relation to a variety of topics. The difference in the teaching style often encouraged students to further their education and to participate in more courses at a later stage.

While there may be similarities between adults and children in how they learn (such as language, interaction and communication), many writers argue that adult learners are different from child learners in a number of ways. The aim of this article is to review how adults learn through examining one particular theory of adult learning.

Adult learners need to know why they are learning new knowledge before they are willing to participate. In the context of evening courses such as those focusing on business subjects, employers seek to convince adult learners to participate in a course by emphasising the benefits of acquiring a qualification or learning new skills. This can be evidenced in situations where adults partici-

pate in courses that focus on management, marketing and accounting skills. Students are encouraged to incorporate what they learn in the classroom into their everyday work lives via a work-based project. If adults are aware why they are learning new skills, there will be a 'readiness' to learn and they will be more willing to participate in discussions in the classroom or learning context. Adult learners who have been given a 'second chance' at education might be more motivated to learn than children or secondary school students because they will be able to draw a connection between the material that is discussed in the classroom and what is happening in their own lives. Unlike children, adults tend to take responsibility for their own learning and they do not want to be directed by the lecturer during class.

Two conflicting learning theories, known as andragogy and pedagogy, have a particular relevance to the adult educator. The pedagogical theory assumes that the student will simply learn what they have been told. Some people would associate pedagogy solely with children, but surprisingly it can also be associated with adult learning. The majority of today's adult learners were exposed to classroom learning in previous educational experiences that promoted pedagogical practices. As a result of this experience adults may be unwilling to participate in an adult education type course later in life as they have the perception that the same style of teaching and learning is still in existence in today's adult classroom.

Of course in certain circumstances students come to a course without having any background knowledge of the field of study. For example, if a person was to attend an accounting course with no background knowledge of the area, the lecturer would have to use the pedagogical approach in which they would explain the basics of accounting to the student. As the course progresses, the student is asked to apply examples from their own interest or field of practice to the course so they can create a link between their own experience and the course material. However, by adopting this strategy it is very difficult to change direction and encourage the student away from being dependent to being independent learners because once the student is comfortable with the style that is being used in the classroom, they might fear a change in style of teaching.

Even though Knowles was a keen advocate of the theory of andragogy he noted that 'pedagogical strategy is appropriate at least as a starting point (when learners are indeed dependent) when entering a totally strange content area' (Knowles, 1998, p. 70). In a sense it is contradictory to what he said previously,

but in reality lecturers in many instances use a pedagogical style of teaching at the start of a course in order to ensure that students gain an understanding of a topic that they may not be very familiar with. However, pedagogy is not without its criticism.

Knowles et al (1998, p.61) stated that pedagogy is based on the following assumptions:

- Firstly, students only need to learn what the teacher teaches them. Students need only learn material that will be used to answer questions during an exam.
- Secondly, the pedagogical theory of learning implies that the adult learners experience is not necessary for learning so adults who have no experience in an area can gain entry onto a course and learn a new skill. For example, institutions that have courses in computers for beginners often state that it is not necessary for students to have previous experience to attend classes.
- Thirdly, according to Knowles et al (1998, p. 63), the 'teachers concept of the learner is that of a dependent personality.' This is true in the case of students who have no knowledge in a particular area and therefore they have to depend solely on the teacher to learn the basics.

They assumed that the teacher's job was to fill the students minds with their own information and the students were not encouraged to question what they were being taught.

The majority of today's adult learners were exposed to classroom learning in previous educational experiences that promoted pedagogical practices. Of course in certain circumstances students come to a course without having any background knowledge of the area. For example, if a person was to attend an accounting course with no background knowledge of the area, the lecturer would have to use the pedagogical approach in which they would explain the basics of accounting to the student. As the course progresses the student is asked to apply examples from their own background to the course so they can create a link between their own experience and the course material.

One learning theory that has attempted to overcome some of the negative aspects of pedagogy is a theory that was introduced by Malcolm Knowles known as andragogy. Andragogy according to Henschke (1998:8) can be defined as ‘a scientific discipline that studies everything related to learning and teaching which would bring adults to their full degree of humaneness.’ This theory tried to identify how adult learners learn and how to involve them in the learning process ‘to free them from the oppression of pedagogy.’ Unlike pedagogy, andragogy is centered on the idea that the lecturer does not possess all the knowledge and that students are encouraged to participate in the classroom by utilising their own experiences.

‘Adult education is quite distinctive in its approach in that it aims to do substantially more than simply impart information to participants’ (Connolly, 1996, pp. 38-39). The lecturer should act as a facilitator in the learning process. This can be achieved by asking students questions that they can relate to their workplace. For example, once students are taught the basic principle of a subject, they could be asked to apply those principles via a work-based project to their company. This will enable them to understand how the theory they have spoken about in class relates to a real life situation. The lecturer can manage this by asking students relevant questions pertaining to their workplace, which will require the student to think about what happens in their organisation on a day-to-day basis. This is further supported in research carried out by Laird (1998, p. 126) who stated that ‘the andragogic model holds the view that the instructor should guide and not manage the content, which is the traditional approach in pedagogy.’

Andragogy might be classed under the category of cognitive theories in that adults are allowed to analyse the material given to them in the classroom and they learn to make connections between the material and their own life experiences. In contrast pedagogy is associated with the behaviourist stream of learning where the student takes for granted what is being said to them and they learn it word for word so that they can receive positive feedback from their lecturers. Laird (1998, p. 125) stated that lecturers who adopt the andragogical theory of learning will ‘use more questions because adults do know a great deal.’

Andragogy is based on five key areas. Firstly, there is the issue that adults need to be made aware of the reason why they have to learn certain material. Knowles



has stated that it is important that students are informed of the benefits of covering this material and how it will benefit them when the course is finished. It is imperative that students are furnished with the learning objectives when they start their course (Knowles et al 1998, p. 63). For the majority of evening courses students are given the course outline and objectives of the course when they enrol in the course.

The second area is the learner's concept of himself or herself. If the learner is very self confident and what Maslow describes as having high self-esteem needs, then the lecturer has to ensure that they allow the student to discuss or present their views during the class session. If the lecturer starts out using a pedagogical method of teaching and encourages the student to become dependent on them for knowledge and then they are in essence creating a dependent student who will have low self-esteem, which will ensure that the student never questions what the lecturer says in class.

Thirdly, andragogy is based on is the experience of the learner and the role that it plays in the classroom. Andragogy assumes that the student has a bank of experience accumulated over their lifetime and that they would like to apply this 'experience' in the classroom so that they can understand the material that is being discussed in the session. Unlike pedagogy, andragogical learners resent having a lecturer's ideas forced upon them and as stated by Knowles, et al. (1998, p. 65), 'adults resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their will on them.' Therefore, they want to be responsible for their own learning. The andragogical model states that adults need to be able to use their experience in the classroom if they want to learn.

Lecturers should encourage the promotion of dialogue in the adult classroom. The use of dialogue in the classroom aids the students' understanding of the material discussed in the class (Quilty, 2003, p. 63). Dialogue can be encouraged through the use of group work, where students are placed in groups and given scenarios or class studies that are relevant to the student's experience. This may also encourage the quieter students in the classroom to participate in the learning process and to air their views through the group.

Fourthly, students want to learn. Motivation plays an important part in adult learning, firstly, in that if students are not motivated to learn they may not participate in the classroom and therefore may leave the course. Secondly, as men-

tioned in the previous point, adult students may be more motivated to learn if the concept of groups were prompted by the lecturer. Maslow stated in his theory of motivation that people have a need to feel that they belong. Students are more motivated if they feel that they belong in the adult classroom and for most adult students they like to belong to a group that they can discuss both academic and personal issues.

Andragogy states that adults are motivated by both internal and external factors. Lecturers have to recognise that by praising and building on the self-esteem of students as it motivates them to learn. Tough found that 'motivation is frequently blocked by barriers such as negative self concept and time constraints' (cited in Knowles, 1994, p. 68). While adult learners may respond to external motivators such as bonuses from their employers when they attain a certain grade, it is the internal priorities that are more important to the learner. Fifthly, for andragogy to work effectively in the classroom the lecturer must promote a climate which provides a safe environment for the student. Abraham Maslow stated that students, especially those with low self-esteem, need to have a safe environment if they are participate in the learning experience (Knowles, 1994, p. 14). In the instance where students are encourage to discuss examples, they are praised for their contribution and not mocked by either the lecturer or other students for their views on a particular issue. Students could be further motivated in the classroom if they are allowed to participate in the planning of the syllabi for the course.

However, in reality, the majority of syllabi are designed by educational institutions or other accreditation bodies such as FETAC or HETAC, which result in both lecturer and student having very little input in what should be included in the syllabi for the course. However, it should be remembered that whether an institution or an accreditation body designs the syllabi students will learn more effectively if they can apply their experience to the subject matter being discussed in the session. Adults will learn material if it is presented in a way that relates to real life situations. Lecturers who use the andragogical method of learning should therefore consider using case studies or histories in class so that students can apply the 'theory' to a practical situation.

Knowles (1980, p. 54) held the view that adults 'tend to be problem centered in their orientation.' This is something that lecturers or facilitators need to take into account when they are planning their classes, as they have to allow

for problem solving as well as interaction with the student. Some adult students prefer to be problem centered but others want the lecturer to lead them through the course, therefore problems arise when adults suddenly find themselves in a situation that they have to think for themselves and participate in the class. Rogers (1989, p. 3) stated that when teaching (adults) the customer, not the subject, should come first and is always right and the customer is the learner. This is often forgotten by colleges who see students as a financial gain and sometimes they are unaware of the method of teaching used by their lecturers in the adult classroom. Therefore, it is imperative that educational institutions should distribute a questionnaire at the end of a course to enable students to air their views on how the lecturer has performed on the course. Educational institutions such as the National College of Ireland ask students to complete questionnaires after each module on their front line supervisory management course.

Andragogy as with many theories is not without fault. Some adult educators are questioning whether it is really a theory. Hartee (1984, p. 205) suggested that Knowles was really presenting guidelines for 'what the adult learner should be like' in the classroom but it was not really a tried and tested theory of learning. Even Knowles (1989, p. 112) came to the conclusion that 'andragogy is less a theory of adult learning than a model of assumptions about learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory.' Indicating that it is a 'conceptual framework', suggests that there are weaknesses with the model and that it is not academically viewed as a theory of adult learning.

Pratt (1993, p. 21) questioned whether andragogy could be classed as a theory of learning. He has admitted that it has helped adult educators understand how adults learn but in reality if andragogy was analysed more closely 'it has done little to expand or clarify our understanding of the process of learning nor has it achieved the status of a theory of adult learning' (Pratt, 1993, p. 21).

When Knowles designed this model of adult learning he assumed a number of factors such as students' desire to participate and learn. However, in reality lecturers are aware that this is not always the case. For instance, employers often send employees on training courses just to say that they are developing and training their students but in the majority of cases they do not investigate whether courses are suitable or of interest to students. As a result students attend classes that they have no interest in and since most courses are funded

by employees on condition the student passes the course, they are also forced to study for exams that they do not really want to sit.

Lack of interest may also indicate that the student will experience a lack of motivation. Knowles (1994, p. 14) acknowledged that 'adults tend to be more motivated to learning that helps them solve problems in their lives.' However, students who are forced by their employers to attend courses that have little or no relevance to what they are doing in the workplace, will feel that what is being discussed in class is not going to help them perform better in the workplace. Therefore these students often attend courses with little or no motivation.

Knowles' theory of andragogy is very much based on the fact that students want to participate in the classroom and in order to participate they must be motivated. However, according to Tough 'motivation is frequently blocked by barriers such as negative self concept and time constraints' (cited in Knowles, 1994, p. 68). Adults have often experienced negative events during their previous education and as a result they come to adult classes with low self-esteem. Rosenstock stated that 'adult education required special teachers, special methods and a special philosophy' (Knowles et al, 1998, p. 59).

Therefore, the theory of andragogy cannot work in the classroom if the lecturer is un-sympathetic to the fact that students may have low self-esteem and if they target them with questions that they may not be able to answer in front of the class. As a result, students may feel very uncomfortable and choose to leave the course rather than sit in the classroom with other students who think that they do not have the intellectual capacity to be in the course.

Another major factor associated with motivation is that fact that mature students, unlike children, teenagers and young adults, have time pressures such as family and full time jobs that often prevent them from attending classes. Often these pressures become so great that they are forced to leave a course and fail to return to education because they feel that they will not be able to finish the course the next time. Grace (1996, p. 386) acknowledged the fact that 'Knowles never considered the organisation and social impediments to adult learning; he never painted the big picture.' This would indicate that Knowles never really considered the constraints on the mature student in a social sense such as barriers to gaining entry into courses and family life. In Ireland those who are considered socially disadvantaged such as travellers, single parents and on low

incomes are often excluded from joining courses that require a fee to be paid. Knowles concept of andragogy is coupled with the idea that adults are 'autonomous, free and growth orientated' (Rodgers, 2000, p. 13). He stated that students should be allowed to use their past experiences to participate in the classroom. However, Quilty drew attention to the fact that Dewey stated that while 'there are experiences in adult education that are worthwhile there are those that are not' (Quilty, 2003, p. 62).

Some students may not be ready for their beliefs to be challenged and as a result they may feel threatened and not participate in future classes or their past experiences may hinder any new learning because they cannot accept that their previous beliefs are wrong. Knowles was not aware of the fact that some adults that attend night courses are what we term 'young adults.' These students are aged eighteen to twenty-five; they may not have accumulated sufficient knowledge to participate in class debates. In some instances these students may feel isolated in that they cannot take part in a class debate if they do not have the same experience as other students in the classroom. This may result in the student 'switching off' and becoming bored in the classroom, which in turn may lead to the student leaving the course early.

Knowles vision of andragogy presents the individual learner as one who is autonomous, free and growth oriented. However, Grace (1996, p. 383) and various other critics have argued the point that there is little evidence that states that adult students are influenced by their society and history and that in reality the educational establishment and awarding bodies set down standards of learning regardless of whether the student has certain life experiences or not. In theory it could be argued that the andragogical model would be the most suitable for the adult learner, but it fails to take into account that at times lecturers have time pressures to which they must adhere. If they were to allow students to discuss material at length they may not be able to cover the course in the allocated time, as they may have to deprive students of certain modules on the course. For instance, in some of the business courses, students have to study two modules each night for two nights a week probably over a period of twenty-four weeks. If it is a three-hour course it means that each module is allocated only one and a half hours, which does not allow the lecturer to discuss material in great depth.

Lecturers, especially in colleges where students pay for their courses, are likely to be under pressure to achieve certain grades at the end of the course. In some of the private second level institutions the grades that students achieve for their Leaving Certificate are advertised so as to attract students to the college. Similarly, there are instances where private third level colleges are now promoting the fact that students have achieved certain awards by external awarding bodies such as ACCA as a way of attracting students. This may place added pressure on lecturers to ensure that students achieve similar results. As a result, lecturers may revert to pedagogical practices to try and ensure high grades.

However, there are some lecturers who take the theory of andragogy to the extreme in that they are aware that mature students may be anxious and may have low self-esteem and with that in mind they adopt an extremely empathetic manner that often results in no learning in the classroom because the lecturer is afraid to challenge the student in case it would damage their self-esteem (Rodgers, 2000, p. 15).

Even though andragogy has numerous faults, Houle (1996, p. 29-30) was of the opinion that andragogy is the 'most learner centered of all patterns of adult education programmes.' Over the past two decades it has drawn adult educators' attention to the fact that they 'should involve learners in as many aspects of their education as possible and in the creation of a climate in which both they and the students can fruitfully learn' (Houle, 1996, p. 30). It has given adult educators the option of using an alternative style in the classroom.

By using the andragogical method they can encourage students to return to education and by allowing them to participate they are treating them like equals and the student is no longer dependent on them for learning as they would have been when they were children in primary and secondary school. This is very evident in the writings of Pratt who has stated that 'andragogy has been adopted by legions of adult educators around the world' (1993, p. 21). He was also of the opinion that in the majority of cases it is the starting point to which educators look when they start to teach adults.

Which theory is the most relevant for the adult learning in the classroom? Most teachers teach the way they learn. The majority of adult educators were taught using the pedagogical style during primary and secondary schooling and in the majority of cases their third level education was very much centered on a

lecturer again using the pedagogical style of teaching. As a result of this many adult educators are more inclined to use 'what worked with them' (Brown, 2003, p. 1). It is imperative therefore that they are aware of the theories that are associated with adult learning and it would make sense that all adult educators should be educated ABOUT adult learning principles in some shape or form. Crews and McCannon stated that once the adult educator is aware of the theories associated with adult learning principles they may implement these in the classroom making it a better learning environment for the adult student (cited in Brown, 2003).

Knowles stated that it is the 'job of the adult educators to move adult students away from their old learning and into new patterns of learning where they become self directed taking responsibility for their own learning and the direction it takes' (Knowles et al, 1998, pp. 66-69).

The question that adult educators must ask themselves is, should they allow students to participate during the lesson on a continuous basis or do they allow it when it suits them? It is important that educators are aware of what the adult student truly wants from their educational experience. It is imperative that adults returning to education encounter positive experiences that will encourage them to further their education. Lecturers must be aware that whatever learning styles and teaching methods are used in the adult classroom that adult education 'began with the basic education needs of learners. The learning needs of the adult have to remain centre stage otherwise we will have lost our way' (Vaughan, 2004).

Andragogy in essence aims to look at how learning in the classroom can be made more attractive for adult students. Therefore, it is imperative that lecturers/tutors are aware of the fact that adult needs are very different to the needs of children in relation to classroom learning. Thereby, the teaching style that is adopted in the adult classroom should be the focus of attention for educational institutions, and this should be monitored to ensure that adult students enjoy the educational experience.

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# Power, Pleasure and Community in a Learning Society

TOM INGLIS

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The question of power is central to our understanding of social life. But what is power and how does it operate? At one level, there is a divide between social classes, reproduced by the state through its laws and policies, the way it distributes resources, and the way it enforces it achieves legitimacy through the media, education and religion (Althusser, 1971). But, as Foucault (1994) reminded us, power is not simply about class and the state and the various apparatuses that legitimate and maintain its power. It exists in the way we think, in how we see, read and interpret the world, and in discourses and practices that create disciplined, well-controlled bodies. Foucault turned the relationship between knowledge and power upside down. He argued that it was not so much that knowledge makes us powerful but, rather, that power in the form of expert discourses – he focused particularly on human sciences – creates knowledge which masquerades as truth. For example, we live in a world capitalist system that produces economic truths that we cannot survive without limited corporations and the pursuit of profit. It was the same economic discourse that announced that there was no necessary econometric rationale for the boom to go bust; that we cannot do without private banks; that there is no other option to the free market.

The question, then becomes whether it is possible to think outside the box of truths that are taken as gospel? When, where, how and among whom is there resistance to these taken-for-granted truths? I am not convinced that resistance can emerge within the education system, particularly at third level, within philosophy, sociology or the human sciences. I think it can only come through a form of educational practice that is embedded in local face-to-face democratic communities. It is through a rigorous practice of learning together of rigor-

ous critical reflection about the way power distorts the search for truth, that organic intellectual communities can be fostered and developed.

I argue that the resistance against the grand narratives or universal truths of our age is best achieved through the cultivation and development of local narratives and truths which are subject to continuous debate and critical reflection within a democratic learning environment. I believe that the opportunity to create such a learning society is particularly strong within communities that have been brought to the brink of destruction through high unemployment, poor housing, discrimination, crime and drugs. It is through resisting power at local level that a new lasting theory and understanding of power can be developed. It may well be that a time of economic recession, in which the legitimacy of institutions such as the Catholic Church, the banks, the state and the market are beginning to be questioned, there is an opportunity for those involved in adult and community education to generate a new debate about power, to develop new ways of learning, to create new truths. There is a need, I believe, for a new agenda for adult learning. My aim in this article is to tease out some of the issues involved in fulfilling this agenda. We are in a new period of ideological turmoil which, as in the past, provides an opportunity for thinking and acting differently.

### **Thinking and acting outside the box**

Looking back over the last fifty years in Ireland, we can identify periods of what Swidler (1986) calls relative ideological calm and other periods of contestation and conflict. In the heydays of the Catholic Church's domination of Irish culture – up to the end of the 1960s – everything seemed settled. There were subaltern, alternative forms of culture, but it was difficult to act or even think outside the Catholic box. In the 1970s many Catholics, particularly women, began to develop a new image and sense of who they were (Inglis, 1997, pp.238-42; O'Connor, 1998, pp.81-108). They thought of limiting their families, remaining on at work after they married, going back to work when their children were older but, most of all, no longer being shy, demur, compliant, obedient women confined to the home. What began as a mainly middle-class urban women's movement, quickly spread around the country (Connolly, 2003).

This internal opposition to a Catholic way of being, became combined with a global flow of culture which through media and travel, permeated the remotest areas of the country (Inglis, 2008). By the middle of the 1990s, Ireland entered

into another ideological calm period. The great battles over contraception and divorce were over: there was no appetite to revive the issue of abortion. Catholics began to distance themselves from the institutional Church and its view of what constituted a good person and a good life and, instead, openly embraced the kind of materialism against which the Church had regaled for so long. In the new era of liberal individualism, people fulfilled themselves and realised themselves as individuals, not through practices of self-denial but through the pleasures of consumption (Inglis, 2006). Traditional truths about what it meant to live a good life began to be discarded.

The rapid economic recession of the late 2000s has brought new ideological turmoil. All that was solid in the days of the Celtic Tiger has begun to melt into air. In fifty years Irish people have moved from believing in the Catholic Church, God and salvation, to believing what they were told by market analysts, business tycoons, bankers and political leaders. They replaced belief in the one true God with the false gods of mammon and now, they too, are beginning to be abandoned. What, then, is to be believed? More importantly, who is to be believed? In periods of ideological calm it is difficult to think outside the box, that the powers dominate the way people think and act. But in times of ideological conflict, when the cows are no longer as sacred as they used to be, there is an opportunity for an explosion of ideas, some of them extreme, some utopian and some simply silly, as to how people might discover new ways of leading fulsome, sustainable, ethical and meaningful lives.

Consumer capitalism has become the unquestioned orthodoxy of modernity. It has become so ingrained that we cannot think of an alternative. Since there is no antithesis, there has been little dialogue. The belief in the never ending need to consume more has become linked to the belief in the infallibility of the market and the need for ever-increasing systems of production and consumption. It has also been linked to the primacy of the individual and the belief that salvation comes through a form of rugged individualism in which the self takes precedence over the group (Elliot and Lemert, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

There is much about consumer capitalism that is fulfilling. It is closely allied to social progress. Would it have been possible to have the dramatic increases

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot and Lemert seem to believe that the more individuals radically and ruthlessly pursue their genuine self-interests the more it will be possible to develop a truly global cosmopolitan society in which we will be all for one-self and oneself for all. I am not convinced.

in health and prosperity without it, not just in the West but elsewhere? Where consumer capitalism thrives people tend to live longer and less miserable and violent lives. It is associated with mature, democratic civil societies; ways of being influenced more by reason than by authoritarian rule and unchallenged orthodoxies.

The problem, however, is that we are consuming ourselves and the planet to death. Marx may have been right when he forecasted that capitalism had sown the seeds of its own destruction, that the endless series of busts and booms would grow deeper and last longer. The economic truth seems to be that there is no other solution to the present depression other than to go back to consuming more of what, many of us, do not really need.

Consumer capitalism thrives on greed and selfishness. It colonises pleasures and desires. It weakens the social bonds that unite people into moral communities. But it is not some inevitable end to history. Human beings are structured within conditions and processes not of their own choosing. But they have the capacity to think and act differently. It is possible to conceptualise an alternative path to freedom and happiness. There is salvation beyond consumption.

The question, then, is how to learn to think and act differently. How can people come together to develop a dialogue, a way of being together, that begins to question the unquestionable that posits a new way of living. In effect, how can adult educators and community leaders help create a mature, learning society? What do people need to learn? I suggest that from the outset, any group of people who come together to learn, should critically reflect about what it is that binds them together, are they real or imaginary, and what are the forces which prevent them from becoming a social and political force? I believe that where adults learn to think and act differently they can develop a sense of trust that enables a form of bonding and belonging which transcends self-interest and enables the emergence of a lasting, sustainable form of community. But the first question that needs to be addressed is who are these adult learners, what is it that brings them together, what is it that binds them but, also, what is it that divides them. What are the truths about themselves that need to be questioned.

### Who are we?

The notion of the Irish people being a nation bound together by shared beliefs, values and practices is regularly reproduced in everyday life. It seems to be taken-for-granted that the nation is simply a bigger, perhaps less dense, form of family and community. But what makes a national community? What are the shared beliefs and values that unite people into a nation? What are the practices that create and sustain a strong feeling of being Irish? Maybe being Irish, and the belief that we are all one people, is a thin shell with no real yolk of belief and practice to sustain it (Anderson, 1991).<sup>2</sup> So if adults in a community are to think outside the box, they might begin by critically reflecting about the state and the media. It is the rhetoric and messages of politicians and those who work in the media who continually create and recreate the notion of us being a national community. The state is a major player in the images we have of ourselves. It collects taxes, develops policies, passes legislation, develops the national infrastructure, and provides education, health and social welfare services. In doing so, it regularly creates an image of us being a national community.

All of this would be palatable and worthwhile if we were, in fact, a single, strong, united national community and the state was some kind of natural embodied leader whose authority and leadership we accepted – in the same way perhaps that young children accept the authority and leadership of their parents. But whoever ‘we’ are, we are far from being a family, and our political leaders are far from being our parents.

The reason, of course, is that the state in capitalist society is always a class state. Over the last fifty years, the Irish state has increasingly favoured some social classes more than others. We were given to believe that if the rich got richer, we would all get rich: ‘A rising tide lifts all boats.’ And so, the developers, the entrepreneurs and the bankers were all given free reign and financial support to become rich. The message was endorsed by many economic analysts, government ministers, political parties; it was preached from so many platforms, that many of us accepted it as gospel. Moreover, a rhetoric was preached and a web of belief woven that we are all ‘one’ people, that we all belong together.

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson’s concept of the nation as being an imagined community created by the media and the state can of course be extended to include many smaller human groups including churches, organisations, families and communities. In effect, any human group which is not related to regular contact, not necessarily face-to-face, between individuals, is in danger of being more imagined than real and therefore ideologically constructed. Benedict Anderson 1991 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

This false sense of community is created and developed in the media. It is the media which sees itself not just as the voice of the Irish people, but as the 'social conscience' of Irish society. It not only reports the news, it investigates what is happening in Irish society on 'our' behalf. It holds court; people are tried and convicted by the media. We have become used to media gurus pontificating over the airwaves about what is good and bad, right and wrong. They no longer just report and bring us the news. They have become the social conscience of Irish society. They tell us the truth about ourselves. They have replaced the parish priests.

The media moulds as much as it reflects public opinion. The problem is that many of those who work in the media take it for granted that they are disinterested, objective and unbiased, that they are 'naturally' representative of the Irish people. Like many others, they begin to think that their interests are the same as everyone else's. They do not see themselves as an elite. As the conscience of society, they report and cover stories about poverty and equality but always reflecting an unquestioned orthodoxy that they, necessarily, will always be with us.

The other problem with the media is that it is not a disinterested public body. The media create buy and sell commodities. Like any other businesses, media corporations are sucked into attracting advertising, into marketing their products, attracting customers.

So the rhetoric from the state, the messages from the media, about us being a national community may be a myth. We are great at talking the talk about all being in this together, but the reality is that people may be more committed to aggressive rugged individualism, to maintaining our competitive advantage, to the fundamentals of *laissez-faire*, liberal individualism than they are to each other as fellow members of a national community.

### **What is a learning society?**

We might say that an individual who cannot think of alternatives, who cannot change, who repeats the same mistakes and who continually abuses himself, is someone who cannot learn. 'Men *are* because they *are* in a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it' (Freire, 1985, p.80). If this is the case, then a society which cannot think outside of never-ending consumption (particularly of goods and

services that are not essential), which continues to destroy the environment on which it is dependent, which is deeply unequal and uncaring about the poor, and which continually runs into recession, is a society that cannot learn. It would also seem obvious that a learning society would seek to explore and develop the means by which its members could lead healthy, happy, fulsome, beautiful, truthful and prosperous lives.<sup>3</sup>

The question, of course, is where is such learning taking place? If it is taking place in our schools, colleges and universities, it may be more by accident than by design. It could be taking place in churches, but the search for salvation is not always compatible with reason, dialogue and the development of a mature, democratic, civil society. I would suggest that the only long-term, viable and sustainable forms of community are local, face-to-face, and small scale. This is not to argue against globalisation, cosmopolitanism and, particularly, a greater identification with humankind. Indeed, I believe that groups working collaboratively at local level can produce goods and services that can be sustainable and economically viable both locally and globally. More significantly, these groups can become the basis of lasting, meaningful social bonds.

There are examples of people in local communities coming together to form tight-knit groups, who develop a strong sense of bonding and belonging, often in response to a social problem such as housing, unemployment, drugs, the environment and so forth. Many of these community organisations are in working-class areas. They come together not so much to discuss who they are, but rather to struggle collectively to achieve a common end. A good example of this is the regeneration of St Michael's Estate in Inchicore, Dublin (Bissett, 2009). People from the community came together to develop better housing but ended up learning lessons about the state, equality, justice and democracy. They were led into addressing the very issues which prevent communities from bonding together. They had to address issues of power, particularly the power of the state and property developers. There are similar stories to be told about communities dealing with drugs, discrimination, health and social services.

We can also learn from the women's movement which from the 1970s involved women from all over Ireland coming together, locally and nationally, to struggle for their independence and rights. But what was interesting was how the

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<sup>3</sup> Bradley and Kennelly (2008: 185–238) develop a quite different notion of learning society. For my review of their book, see *Dublin Review of Books*, Spring 2009 at [drb.ie](http://drb.ie)

women's movement included debates and discussions about what it meant to be a woman, and how women who were divided along class, religious and ethnic lines, could come together to learn from each other (Inglis, 1994).

There is, however, a need to broaden these debates and discussions to include members of the middle classes who have become isolated and detached from community bonds, whose sense of bonding and belonging comes from family, hobby and leisure groups, but who are not members of groups who are struggling to achieve change, who do not perhaps critically reflect about who they are.

What is needed is a mushrooming of new types of community groups, which bring individuals together in such a way that helps them transcend from just living in a community to living *for* a community. The collapse of consumer sentiment in contemporary capitalism may be more than just a blip. It may indicate the desire for a different lifestyle, a different way of being in the world. Maybe it suggests the need for people to come together, as strangers, to learn to cooperate and collaborate in a new way, to achieve new goals, and to develop a sense of bonding and belonging.

However, it seems to me that we should think about developing and encouraging new forms of adult learning and education, particularly those which are specifically oriented towards community development and cooperation. The advantage of creating local learning centres is that they can bring together strangers to think, talk, debate and reflect on issues about which people are concerned. This could be for specific purposes such as to improve the quality of life, housing, social welfare, transport, environment but they might also be for leisure and pleasure, to read, walk, watch, eat and drink. Learning centres also have the advantage of being religiously and politically neutral and of avoiding power struggles. There is a need for a new beginning. What is not needed is that local community groups and learning centres be hijacked by fundamentalists who are certain about who 'we' are, what it is to be Irish, and the political way forward. The task is to avoid any learning being hijacked by existing political allegiances and their definition of the truth.



### **What is to be learnt?**

The question of what is to be learnt, and how it is to be learnt, is a democratic decision that best emerges from consensus within the group of people that come together. There are, however, two issues which seem to be central to any critically reflective or learning society: power and pleasure. While it is impossible to live outside of power there is certain freedom in trying to speak the truth about the way in which it operates and in resisting its different forms. This is central to preventing power becoming unquestioned, absolute and tyrannical. It is all too easy, especially in times of economic recession, to slip into fascism and fundamentalism. What was perhaps most frightening about the Nazi regime was the way so many Germans so readily acquiesced and actively participated in the extermination of Jews.

At the same time, while we cannot escape from power and the way it structures our knowledge, thoughts and practices, we can try to transcend it by focusing on and developing pleasures. The cultivation of intense, durable, long-lasting pleasures which revolve around regular, routine practices and which are based on bodily being in the world, is not just a virtue: it is a primary means of transcending power, particularly the colonisation of desire by the state, the market and the media.

### **Power**

Power creates knowledge, understanding and ways of being. It structures beliefs, values, practices and, at the level of the individual, one's identity and sense of self. It operates in different institutional forms such as the state, market, media, military, medical, churches and so forth. It creates discourses which regulate and control the way we think and behave. It always involves domination. It always involves illusion; people misrecognise and take for granted its institutional forms and discourses. We take it for granted, for example, that the state is the primary provider of education; it regulates and controls what is taught when and where, that there are three levels and that success at each level is based on merit. But behind the institutional discourse is the reality that education has become the primary mechanism for reproducing class inequality. But there are other misrecognitions. Why is fourth level, or adult and community education, not seen as equally important to the other levels? In terms of learning, why is it assumed that the teacher always knows best what should be learnt? A key issue, which learners need to engage with from the outset, is the ways in which they can be dominated by teachers, the curriculum, the state and its educational institutions and structures?

Power is, then, as ubiquitous as it is misrecognised. It colonises our way of thinking and being. Critically reflecting about power is often as difficult as calling into question the air we breathe: it becomes natural and taken for granted. In settled times, we do not question the way the state, media, market, church or other institutions dominate and control our lives. At the micro level of everyday life, those in positions of power, whether they are medical consultants, civil servants, bankers, lecturers, parents often do not critically reflect about or seek to negate the tactics by which their power is reproduced, the way they dominate and control others. It is more difficult for people to make connections between the tactics they use and the strategies of institutions and organisations and long-term processes of social change which create and sustain divisions between class, gender, religion, ethnicity, race, age and so forth. These are not reproduced by chance.

It is also important to realise, as Foucault reminded us, that power is operated in and through discourses, particularly the human and medical sciences that have become central to creating and maintaining discipline and control (Foucault, 1980a).<sup>4</sup> Power is exercised over and invested within bodies. It is through regimes of bodily discipline and control that we realise ourselves as individuals. It is, for example, through recognising, understanding and resisting the way sex and the stimulation of sexual desire has penetrated so many aspects of everyday life – from dressing, adorning, grooming, dieting and exercising to treating, removing and remoulding parts of the body – that we can begin to comprehend the way power operates (Foucault, 1980b). What is it that makes us adore and idealise the bodies of the Bratz and the Barbie and abhor the notion of a plain, ordinary, unordered, irregular body?

### **Pleasure**

The trick of consumer capitalism is to keep stimulating desire which, of course, can never be fulfilled. We are socialised into the practice of our fulfilling desires through consumption. It is something that we learn from a young age. It is fundamental to being part of the world capitalist system. Although it is not part of the formal education system, we learn how to channel our desires into endless consumption. Consumption is the biggest unquestioned orthodoxy

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault began to see the discourses of truth that were produced about humans, including education, psychiatry, criminology and so forth, as discourses of power which were exercised in and through people, both instrumentally and voluntarily. Foucault did not see power as something negative that was exercised unwillingly over people. Instead he tended to see it as something as a subtle form of control that was willingly incorporated by people in their struggle not just to exercise power over others, but to realise themselves as individuals.

of our time (Appadurai, 1996; Campbell, 1987; Featherstone, 1991). We lead ourselves to believe that the good life revolves around ever-faster, ever-intensifying repetitive circles of working harder to consume more. Consumption has become the new god and, like the God which used to be at the centre of life, it cannot be questioned. What makes the contemporary world secular is that unlike before the question of God is now a matter of open, increasingly acrimonious, debate (Taylor, 2007). But what makes the contemporary world capitalist is that we cannot question consumption. Yes, there are those who withdraw from the world, whose lives revolve around trying to get beyond consumption, who seek to dissolve their egos and channel their desires into pleasures that are not rooted in buying. But they are the queer ones.

It is difficult to think and act outside the consumption box. We are continually persuaded, and we continually persuade ourselves that we need, that we have to have the latest and the best. We have developed a theology of consumption. We are the good people; we are worth it; we deserve it. We have developed an ethic of consumption. It is our duty to consume more. If we fail, the world capitalist system will collapse. Even as the environment decays around us we cannot question the notion that the way forward is through ever-increasing levels of economic growth, ever-increasing levels of consumption.

Consumption, then, has become the most subtle form of power, the most subtle form of discipline and control. We have not just become secularised and sexualised, we have become consumerised. If we are to learn to be different, if we are to learn together, then it might be worthwhile learning to develop long-lasting, fulfilling, sustainable pleasures that are not based on and do not revolve around consumption. They are as plentiful as they are varied, but they have to be cultivated. More importantly perhaps, if we are to develop the type of communities that create and sustain lasting social bonds, that provide the base for stable, fulsome senses of self, then we need to go back to fulfilling pleasures together (Scheff, 1997). Strong, viable senses of belonging, strong rugged individuals that do not dissolve into loneliness and depression emerge within communities that are caring and supportive without being rigid and dominating. And what is central to those communities is the collective fulfilment of pleasure. It is not just that people do not bowl together any more, they do not cook and eat, read and write, walk and talk, paint and sing, play and dance, plant and harvest and, worst of all, become sick, ill and die together (Putnam, 2000).

We used to praise and value the simple pleasures in life, but then they got subverted by marketing and advertising. There was a time when conspicuous consumption was frowned upon in Ireland, when any form of self-indulgence was seen as a sin. It was a time when the Catholic Church reigned over Irish social and cultural life. It was repressive. It was all about self-denial. Then we moved rapidly to self-indulgence, perhaps too rapidly and, in doing so, lost the sense of enjoyment and fulfilment that comes from simple pleasures. We have kicked religion, priests and God out of our daily life, shopping has become the new form of salvation. We have bounded into lifestyle choices, ways of being and presenting ourselves that are created for us by marketing and advertising gurus.

There is, of course, a need for many people, not just in Ireland, but around the world to consume more. But they are not the well-fed middle classes who will never know when they have enough. Hundreds and thousands of people live below the poverty line in Ireland. The gap between the rich and the poor in Ireland is still enormous. Around the world it is worse. At least 50,000 people, of whom 30,000 are children, die each day from poverty related illnesses. They desperately need to consume the basics for which we the rich, have long lost the taste. We have lost the art of 'making do' of 'making things last', of repairing rather than replacing.

When, in the poem she read at Barack Obama's inauguration, Elizabeth Alexander referred to someone 'stitching a hem, darning a hole in a uniform, patching a tire' she was perhaps evoking a nostalgic remembrance of times past. How many of the younger generation would know what darning is, let alone how to darn? And whose fault is that?

Despite all the cookery programmes television, and all the cookbooks that are sold along with them, the amount of time people are spending cooking and preparing food continues to decrease. It used to be said that a family that prayed together stayed together, then it became eating together. If present eating trends continue the family could be in trouble.

There is, then, a need to learn, to debate and discuss, how we might develop new, lasting, sustainable forms of pleasure which do not necessarily involve consumption and which if shared could become the basis of strong social bonds within which a strong sense of identity, self and belonging are developed (McWhorter, 1999).

It would, perhaps be as inadvisable as it would be unacceptable, to go back to the days when fulfilling pleasures and desires was often seen as a mortal sin. On the other hand, to return to mindless, rampant consumption seems equally unethical and, in the long term, environmentally unsustainable. In the absence of religious restraints, it is becoming imperative that we begin a debate, that we teach our children a new viable, alternative art of existence, of living life, which revolves around cultivating pleasures and fulfilling desires and balancing these with our responsibilities to our families, community and society.

We are then living in an anomic state of being. We have, or at least should have, begun to reject the type of consumption in which 'no expense was spared' in fulfilling pleasures. We should move slowly to seeing those who engage in unrepentant, conspicuous consumption, who boast about what they have bought, who display their wealth, as being unethical. We should, perhaps, see those magazines that reveal the secret, hidden interiors of the homes and lives of the stars as pornographic magazines which people would feel reluctant to be seen looking at in public.

We need to create a new vision of the good life, of what it is to live a beautiful, rewarding, fulsome life. We have been willingly led astray into a mixture of hedonism and consumerism. We need to find a new way forward. There are many examples of community groups who have come together, who have developed a sense of bonding and belonging from struggling against poverty, drugs, unemployment and bad housing. They are the remnants of the Celtic Tiger which we need to build on to create a new society. To do this, those of us who are well-off need to be courageous and self-sacrificing. We need to pay more taxes and find alternative, responsible and environmentally sustainable forms of pleasure. The question, then, is how can we learn to think and act differently. How and among whom can we begin a dialogue, a way of being together, that questions the unquestionable, that posits new ways of living?

### **Conclusion**

We are living in unsettled times. Nothing is sacred or certain. Questions are beginning to be asked. People are beginning to wonder is there another way of living life beyond consumer capitalism. The challenge for everyone, but particularly perhaps for those involved in adult education, is to respond to these new opportunities. I believe that there is a need for people to come together in new and innovative ways to question and learn. Obviously it is up to each group to

decide what it is that they need to question and learn. I suggest, however, that one way of beginning is to think about power, its different forms, the way it operates in their lives and the way it which it colonises their sense of self and ways of being in the world. I also think that, at the same time, it might be good to focus on what it means to live a good, fulsome and pleasurable life.

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# **SECTION THREE**

## COMMENT SECTION

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# Beyond Redemption? Locating the Experience of Adult Learners and Educators

ANNE B. RYAN, BRÍD CONNOLLY, BERNIE GRUMMELL AND  
FERGAL FINNEGAN

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## **Introduction: theory and praxis in adult education**

Our aim is to continue the conversation initiated by Denis O’Sullivan in the 2008 issue of the *Adult Learner*. Any opportunity to critically reflect, to think anew and to re-imagine adult education through debate and dialogue is welcome and it is in that spirit that we respond. We wholeheartedly agree that ‘adult educators should not be outside the remit of their own theorising’ (O’Sullivan, 2008, p.29), but subject their own ideas, assumptions and practices to critical scrutiny. O’Sullivan raises several important points about the nature of Irish adult education and the need to develop a rigorous theoretical basis for our work. We wish to engage with his observations on the prevalence of ‘redemptive’ discourses in Irish adult education. In particular we want to reflect upon O’Sullivan’s concern with how adult educators can ‘maintain a transformative role while respecting the integrity of our students as co-participants in the process’ (2008, p.14).

In our response, we will briefly outline how we understand the relationship between praxis and theory and how this shapes our conception of the role of the learner and the educator in adult education. In offering this analysis we understand that it is partial, necessarily incomplete and continuing the dialogue began by O’Sullivan.

### **Beyond redemption? Locating the experience of adult learners and educators**

O'Sullivan's critique of what he terms 'redemptive' approaches to adult education is based on its 'vanguardism, limited reflexivity and circumscribed student agency' (2008, p.21). Such ideas and discourses are at work in adult education influenced by the pervasive influence of Catholic social teaching in Ireland that O'Sullivan describes. Just how deeply rooted this redemptive phenomenon is amongst religious and secular Irish educators has been critically explored by Hussey (1999, p.44) based on his experience in community theatre.

I have asked participants to describe how they see themselves at work and to move towards a depiction of their vision of their role. The depiction is done visually by sculpting another participant into an image representing how they see themselves. By far the most popular image sculpted is that of a person standing, feet firmly grounded, head held high, with warm smile and wide, outstretched, inviting arms.

So when asked to physically express their educational ideal many practitioners chose to hold their hands outstretched like the famous statue that towers over Rio De Janiero. Hussey calls this 'The Jesus of Rio syndrome' in which education is seen as a form of care and charity given from a position of dominance. We agree with O'Sullivan that critical reflexivity is absolutely necessary to overcome the temptation to see oneself as a redeemer. However, we are a little less certain about the way that O'Sullivan uses this critique to describe a whole range of diverse ideas and practices within the field.

From our perspective the use of redemption as an overarching and all-encompassing discourse does not capture the diversity of developments that have taken place in Irish adult education over the past thirty years. In particular, we would point to the growth in critical, learner-centred education and the use of group learning in recent times. Group engagement in learning involves a radical re-positioning of learners, away from the individualist models promoted in mainstream education towards collective and transformative models of adult and community education. The critical perspective enables learners to actively reflect upon, politicise and re-shape their world. Radical and feminist educators attempt to embrace the direct experience of personal and political liberation as agents of change, rather than teaching others how and why to change. They identify their own need for emancipation and co-create a language of

possibility with learners. This stands in contrast to O’Sullivan’s view (2008, p.19) that the distinctive features of the redemptive discourse in adult education consist of ‘identifying *targets* for redemption and specifying their needs’ (our emphasis). In the former, learners identify their own needs and knowledge, rather than the other way around.

In keeping with the ethos of learner-centredness, we conducted a small piece of research among some of the adult learners we are working with, asking them to describe their understanding of adult and community education. The responses repeatedly cited self-directed learning and learner-centeredness as key characteristics of adult education. They also mentioned the importance of experience (which they transformed through learning); the role of adult education in achieving greater social equality; recognising the experience of alienation in other learning contexts and the need to belong; developing supportive learning (in which people learn from one another and co-construct knowledge); and creating more egalitarian relationships between tutors and learners. These responses, albeit gathered on a modest scale and briefly analysed, demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the ideas that underpin much of adult and community education and bear little resemblance to the redemptive discourse that O’Sullivan claims dominates adult education.

We think that it may well be more difficult to generalise about the culture, practices and ideas at work within adult education than O’Sullivan outlines. His analysis tends to smudge the differences between very distinctive approaches and tends to misrepresent adult education as a unified and univocal field. This lack of specificity means redemptive education is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere and the object of critique is only dimly and intermittently visible. However, by locating the debate almost exclusively within academic discourses, O’Sullivan misses the opportunity to locate it in practice.

### **Praxis, learning and pedagogy**

One of the defining characteristics of adult education is its dual pedagogical role where participants – learners and educators – work together to co-create knowledge. This requires a critical questioning of the tendency to naturalise knowledge and instead explores how and why we create meaning. We, as adult educators and learners, learn to be reflexive about our practices and develop theory that is grounded in an engagement in practice. Instead of drawing boundaries between theoretical positions, we learn to accept the permeable

boundaries and bridges between theory and practice, as teaching and learning are inextricably interwoven.

A pedagogy of uncertainty can create a critical effect, by encouraging both learner and tutor to interrogate the discourses that influence how they interpret their own experiences. Thus, we can subvert normative discourses, identities and knowledges and go on to create new knowledge regarding transformation, emotion, agency, liberation, resistance and creativity. (Ryan, McCormack and Ryan, 2004, p.67)

Radical educators are concerned with the tension between articulating one's own political position and holding a learning space that allows learners to create knowledge for themselves. Always, there is an acceptance that outcomes are messy, contingent, revisable and partial. Many educators practise *phronesis*, or practical wisdom which 'requires full engagement in practical challenges, embracing mistakes and messes, insight through reflection and revision of personal practices' (de Guerre and Taylor, 2004, p.74).

Adult educators want to achieve greater exposure and currency for silenced or muted discourses that challenge the structures that reproduce injustice and inequality. They want to see learners emerge as active citizens concerned with these big philosophical issues of how we can act and think in ways that promote human and planetary well being. But they take the new knowledge from social movements into an *engagement* with learners. They do not act as initiators, inducting learners into certain approved ways of knowing. They are instead clearers of barriers; they seek to demystify so that coping, critiquing, resisting and creating are available to all in daily life (Ryan, McCormack and Ryan, 2004). As adult education practitioners and theorists, we need to pay more attention to analysing the nature of transformative learning and how it is *achieved*.

### Conclusion

To be reflexive, as Bourdieu (1977; 2000) has tirelessly argued, demands that we pay attention to the way social conditions and power inform and authorise academic knowledge. We need to articulate our study of the field in such a way that we avoid traditional and familiar assumptions about the dominance of theory and naming above reflection and transformative action. Ensuring an ongoing and useful dialogue requires different parameters, some of which we have drawn attention to in this discussion. The conversation also needs to include sustained attention to important external forces that influence adult education (for instance national and global economic trends and the demands set by the state and international policy bodies). So we would like to end by welcoming the critique of O'Sullivan and offering an open invitation to educators and learners to continue this debate according to their own terms of reference.

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# **SECTION FOUR**

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

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# Adult Learning in Groups

BRID CONNOLLY

*(Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press, €25.64, pp. 192, 2008) ISBN-13: 978-0-33-522860-7)*

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The stated aim of this book is ‘to explore the implications of learning in groups in order to shed light on the processes involved, to enhance our understanding of the processes and to enable us to use them for the benefit of learners’ (p.111).

The author’s extensive experience in working at the coalface of adult learning in a variety of roles, as student, tutor, facilitator and researcher helps to ensure that the aims of the book are addressed in an interesting and comprehensive way. The book is a welcome addition to the personal libraries of those engaged in adult learning. It is very reader friendly and has the potential to become a useful reference for practitioners and participants in the field.

The book is systematically structured. Each chapter contains an introduction and a summary reflection to assist the reader clarify their understanding of the main theme running through it. The book covers the context in which adults learn and evolution of adult learning with appropriate references from the work of the main theorists, Freire, Skinner, Rogers, Maslow and Argyris are included. These writers are referenced to support best practice approaches and applications as championed by the author.

The author deals with many of the main developments which inform our understanding of the curricula and learning perspectives that support adult learning in groups. Fundamental concepts relevant to both facilitator and student are covered offering a very detailed and rounded examination of the subject matter to provide for further reflection and analysis.

The content of the book is clearly influenced by the author's practical experience in defining, developing, presenting and evaluating her practice. The author propounds the 'everyone and everything is your teacher' philosophy in highlighting a range of best practices. A clear distinction is made between on the one hand, approaches taken on adult community based education and adults returning to education from home and workplace, and on the other hand, approaches adopted and practised in the formal post secondary education sector.

The many subtleties inherent in engaging adults in learning are exposed for examination and use. Overall the book is a treasure chest of ideas and perspectives. Einstein's approach to education, of not teaching his pupils but creating the environment in which they can best learn, reflects much of what is proposed by the author. In this book the preferences of the learner often dictate the direction of the learning process.

The many and varied exercises and activities as presented in chapter 9 on critical practice inform the concept of a 'community of interest' and provides scaffolding to support the adult learner in difficult times. This chapter includes many useful tools and tips to aid both facilitator and learner.

I would commend this book to adult educators, policy makers and students in equal measure. It is easy to read with theory and practice interwoven seamlessly throughout. In this age of constant and rapid change where widespread commitment to lifelong learning is required, this book provides a wide variety of learning options for all stakeholders engaged in adult learning in groups today.

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# Community Education & Social Change: Qualitative Research Exploring the Current Nature of Community Education in Donegal

CLAIRE GALLIGAN

*(Donegal, Donegal Community Education Forum & Co. Donegal VEC)*

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The recent research report exploring the current nature of community education in Donegal, *Community Education and Social Change* is a valuable addition to the rather sparse body of research in the area of community education in Ireland. The research was funded by Donegal VEC and supported by the Donegal Community Education Forum which is a consortium of organisers and groups involved in addressing exclusion and disadvantage. Donegal is a large county with the highest rates of unemployment in Ireland, although that may well be disputed since the 2006 Census on which this data is based, and it also has the lowest rates of admission to higher education and participation in upper secondary education. It is a largely rural county and access to public transport is often cited as one of the biggest barriers to access to learning opportunities.

When the Back to Education Initiative came on stream in 2003 with two separate strands, formal and community, Donegal VEC was unusual in that rather than supporting provision under these two strands it took a more holistic approach and recognised the importance of different responses to learner needs by a range of formal and informal providers. There is now a rich and varied community education provision across the county.

Those who are committed to the vision and power of community education as a means of engaging adult learners, especially those who have had the least advantages in educational and economic terms, have strong convictions about the radical and transformative nature of community education. AONTAS has evolved a definition which is at the radical end of the spectrum and which is used as a yardstick in this report to explore how community education is seen

by providers and experienced by learners. The report uses a mixture of questionnaire surveys and focus groups to connect with forty-one community groups who responded as well as a range of learners and workers.

Many of its findings are hardly startling; the old chestnuts of funding, transport and childcare float persistently to the top of the barriers for learners as they have done for the past thirty years. There are also predictable views on accreditation with stronger belief on the part of providers that it is not a priority while learners identified it as important for them. The chaotic, piecemeal and short term funding sources for groups largely dictates what they can do. It is no surprise that groups who have access to more sustainable resources and who can afford to employ dedicated workers are more likely to adopt processes and learning programmes which allow participants to analyse and understand their own place in society and to take actions to collectively change their situations.

Another strong indicator coming through the report of the 'type' of community education being offered is the level of professional development of the people who deliver the programmes. People working in the community sector come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences ranging through formal teacher training, community development and experiential learning and, therefore, bring their own beliefs and philosophies with them into their teaching practice. This reality plays a large role in accounting for the range of provision across the spectrum from traditional to radical found in this research.

Regardless of the predictability of some of the findings what leaps out of the report is the conviction, commitment and persistence of the people involved in community education in Donegal, whether they are providers or facilitators or tutors or learners. Community education works for people and that is why it needs to be properly supported and resourced. This report shines a light on its success, its challenges, its strengths and weaknesses and provides a valuable picture of what it takes to truly respond to the needs of adult learners.

**BERNIE BRADY**

Director  
AONTAS.

# Whatever it Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America

PAUL TOUGH

(*New York: Houghton Mifflin, \$26, pp. 296, 2008: ISBN 978-0-618-56989-2*)

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The philosophy behind the project is simple. If poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment and violence, failing schools and broken homes, then we can't just treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal that entire community. And we have to focus on what actually works. (President Barack Obama commenting on the work of the Harlem Children's Zone Project, July 2008).

This book details the work of the Harlem Children's Zone Project, a 97-block educational intervention that now caters for some 10,000 inner-city children from 'Baby College' through to the 'Promise Academy' at pre-Kindergarten, Elementary and High School levels. The project is endorsed by Presidents Clinton and Obama, the latter promising to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in 20 cities across the US. Its founder and director, Geoffrey Canada, is personally credited with inspiring renewed approaches to combatting urban poverty in America. The author of the book, Paul Tough, is an editor at the *New York Times Magazine*. His narrative begins with the project's launch in 2004 and evolves alongside critical incidents in the project's development. Throughout the book, his voice shadows that of the project's founder and director, and numerous hopes, disappointments and promises of 'success' are regaled.

The book opens with the Promise Academy lottery – a system devised to be democratic yet leaves the fate of many children's enrolment to chance. For the 'fortunate' ones – many are disappointed – the Harlem Children's Zone Project offers real educational hope. This is reflected in its charter school status – wealthy business people with a clear ideological mission sit on its board of

directors and finance the project to the tune of tens of millions of dollars each year. Therein lies the first of three significant paradoxes. This project embraces inclusivity in its ethos and culture (there are no fees or academic entrance criteria, for example), yet it is selective (evidenced by its specific candidature and elevated position vis-à-vis other school providers in the community). There are some attempts to provide after-school programmes for those that do not qualify for school admission. However, in reality, this project sets aside, indeed endorses, its virtues in opposition to other 'poor', 'ineffective' school providers in the community. This identity construction is unproblematically accepted by the author (indeed, by the board of directors and aforementioned politicians) and the project is presented as 'new', a departure from extant 'failing' schools in the neighbourhood. Of course, this position may be legitimated by the fact that, for the 'fortunate' ones that do gain access, this school serves them well. There is no shortage of 'redemptionist' imagery in this regard – kids are referred to as being 'saved', families and the character of the neighbourhood 'transformed'.

Undoubtedly, Harlem children face grave inequalities – mortality rates, ill health, crime, violence, unemployment, poor educational qualifications, and low levels of social and cultural capital are all too common. A racialised dimension to inequality is demonstrated by numerous local and national statistics that place African Americans disproportionately in the lowest socio-economic strata of US society. Some attempts by the author are made to explain this. These centre on such evidence as the Moynihan and Coleman Reports (1965) that indicate the importance of home environment in the negative educational outcomes experienced by many poor black children. This evidence is highly contestable. Moreover, by not coherently conceptualising racist achievement outcomes, the conservatising project is at risk of reproducing same systemic processes. The threaded argument essentially presents the *raison d'être* of educational reform as addressing significant cognitive skills deficits amongst poor African American children. Definitively, the author (2008, pp 39, 40) remarks: 'Of course poor people have deficits [...], that's what poverty is: a lack of resources, both internal and external.' The clear responsibility of educational reformers is to 'solve' these deficits. While few can argue with the need for solutions, such a position betrays a second major paradox. This is manifest in the book's evidential base, specifically its treatise of poverty. Here, the author presents a mixed (oft oppositional) bag of philosophical, theoretical and empirical arguments. Some sources are sensitive to deeper causal explanations of poverty



and others are highly insensitive to such cultural deficit critique. Ultimately, data is used to support the latter ‘science’ and the project’s focus on ameliorating cognitive skills deficits. A conceptual position is thus arrived at from, what appears, a pastiche of contrary ideas and evidence. In essence, a philosophy of poverty is foreshadowed by, what Marx has coined, a ‘poverty of philosophy.’

It is clear that the project’s director has lived through poverty, understands the community very well and genuinely cares for its welfare. His empathy with young children and their families is palpable. Indeed, there is a real sense that Geoffrey Canada knows only too well that others (through their socio-economic, cultural, class and racialised identities) are more advantaged than his student cohorts. He seeks to redress this inherent inequality through conscientious, committed action. These qualities, alongside his acknowledgement of education as a lifelong process (from the very earliest stages of a child’s life), are indeed noteworthy – though his reference here to “a conveyor belt” is educationally objectionable. This betrays a third significant paradox. For all the care ethic demonstrated by the director, his board and staff, and by those that support the project socially and politically, burning questions remain. Despite the promotional feel of this project (even its positive ‘outcomes’), one must ask: to what extent is the project a *renewal* of educational provision or ‘more of the same’? In line with its poverty paradigm, the project remains culturally organised around cognitive upskilling. This lends itself towards a regime of ‘high stake’ testing. The impact on teaching and learning is profound with intensification effects at its methodological core, made all the more urgent by the need to arrest ‘contamination’ (p. 98) and ‘disease’ (Obama, July 2008). Schooling is thus ‘done’ to children and the project becomes highly interventionist – methodologically structured and measured in accordance with accepted ‘outcome’ norms (along political, socio-economic, class and racial dimensions). Paradoxically, the ‘academic care’ ethic of the project appears diluted by its own acritical stance and its neglect of other (non-traditional) learning methodologies. Pragmatic expediency prevails at the expense of more critical approaches to educational provision. There are those (certainly within the project) that argue that this is necessary, even desirable. Should we not focus on “what actually works” (Obama, July 2008) and simply ‘get things done’? Do poor, black students have any real choice? In addressing these searching questions, the discerning reader may come to learn much about his/her own ideological stance.

There are merits to this book. Not least there is acknowledgement of: inclusion and the needs of disadvantaged learner groups; lifelong learning, specifically the need for early and sustained learning stage connections; the role of parents in children's learning; and the need for education to be viewed (alongside health, housing, etc.) as a conjunctural, community-based policy. I personally found the three paradoxes above both challenging and thought-provoking. The writing style of this book is easy. But its content is anything but. Readers of, and practitioners in, the field of adult community education will appreciate this. For this reason, this book is commended for what is said, but perhaps more importantly, for what remains unsaid.

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# ‘Our own Voice’ – A Report documenting the Work of the Adult Community Education Network

SANDRA ROE

*(Adult Community Education Network, 2008)*

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‘Our own Voice’ is a study designed to document the work of eight voluntary adult education groups, all members of the Adult Community Education (A.C.E.) network that operates mostly in south county Dublin. In addition the study seeks to define the model of adult education that operates within the network and notes some key challenges facing voluntary adult education provision today.

The groups in the ACE Network offer a range of adult education opportunities within their respective communities. Some work from excellent premises while others have less adequate locations. Most have operated for more than 20 years and now provide programmes for more than 5,000 students each year and employ over 100 teaching staff. The network itself offers support, advice, assistance and guidance across a wide range of practical issues facing members.

The report considers in some detail the actual model of adult education that the A.C.E. network uses. Key features include being holistic and inclusive, flexible in approach, accessible and affordable and the creation of an active social environment for learning. The other key feature is the involvement of voluntary personnel from the community who work to benefit other people in that community. The benefits are documented and include social, personal, mental health, educational as well as community benefits and outcomes.

The report repeatedly returns to the definition of the work of the Network. Members believe that what they offer should be officially regarded as community education. Definitions of community education typically focus on the community defining its own needs and developing suitable responses.

However, community education is usually seen as addressing structural and educational disadvantage and focusing on specific groups and areas. While network members rightly argue that social disadvantage is evident across the entire community and is not just confined to the so-called disadvantaged areas it is very clear that levels of disadvantage are concentrated in specific residential areas. Community education responses in these areas are likely to continue to receive official support and encouragement from the statutory providers.

The place of volunteerism in the adult education field is an important issue raised in this report. How does volunteering work in an Ireland that has so radically changed? Today high standards are expected at every level. Quality frameworks place new professional requirements on providers demanding strategies, policies, progression routes, certification, monitoring, procedures, evaluations and record keeping to unprecedented levels. Customers have also changed. In the case of the ACE Networks, many originally offered services to stay at home mothers on new housing estates. Today customer profile has changed as more women work outside the home. The ACE Network also faces the usual challenges of voluntary organisations – aging volunteers, difficulties in recruitment of new volunteers, lack of recognition for the work that has been done over decades and simply being taken for granted. When something goes wrong, however, being a volunteer won't protect you from the wrath of an irate customer making a complaint or looking for their money back!

Adequate recognition for the work of the A.C.E. network is perhaps the underlying theme of this report. The plea to broaden the definition of community education to include the work of the network may have its source in volunteer fatigue engendered over decades of organisational work and the sheer grind involved in sustaining the programmes from year to year.

There is a strong sense of being taken for granted among network members. Specifically they seek more recognition from the VEC. There is a feeling among the Networks that the VEC is unaware of their existence, that they deserve better recognition and that they are not consulted on issues that concern them. However, the interviews with key VEC staff suggest a strong awareness of the work of the network. Many believe that there would be no classes in some areas without the voluntary work of the network members. Others felt the VEC would have to step in and organise provision if the Network ceased to exist. The report also notes that the VEC Community Education Facilitators are in

the process of setting up a new community education network. Membership for the ACE Network of this new network could provide a forum for matters of concern. In reality the VEC seems to have an ambiguous relationship with the ACE Network, on the one hand valuing their contribution and on the other regarding them as anachronistic.

A number of interviewees suggest that the Network needs to raise its profile and more actively promote the value of its work. Many regard classes offered by the Network as a stepping-stone to further or higher education. Attendance at what might be regarded as leisure classes, often has the effect of increasing confidence and encouraging the individual to seek guidance and progress to other educational opportunities. Returning to education in a non-threatening environment can encourage individuals who have had a poor early experience to begin to view education in a positive light once again. The report also mentions those who have gained work promotion through attendance at classes. Capture and publication of this kind of information would raise the profile of the Network and increase its perceived value.

This is a timely report that highlights the need to acknowledge and respect the contribution of volunteers, the need to re-think our view of community education, the importance of networking for community educators and the value of documenting the work that is actually being done by voluntary adult education groups.

**SEAN CONLON**  
Education Officer  
Co Clare VEC.





The primary task of a Journal of Adult and Community Education in Ireland is to be part of the conversations that practitioners have with each other so that the solidarities on which we rely for effective work can be encouraged, supported and nourished. As we struggle to assess the depth of the current depression and try to come to terms with the extent of state cut backs we must not despair. We have (those old enough to remember) come through such time before. This is not to diminish the problem. The challenge posed is to identify the learning needs of our economy and of our society so as to support, through adult educational programmes, some of the learning needed transcend the 'Awful Truth.'

The 'Awful Truth!' of institutionalised church and state child abuse also forces us to rethink not only who we were as a society but who we are now and what learning we need to achieve a better future for all. This has always been the task of adult and community education. But it has never been so starkly presented.

An article on public education and learning through museums raises important questions as to how reconciliation might be supported. Other questions are raised about the power of the consumer society and how we might forge new imagined communities as an antidote. What is a good life, is a useful question. What is a good community and how might it help in the present situation, are worth exploring.

Other authors add in significant ways to our shared understanding of our practice and in the process ask and move towards answers to some fascinating questions. What's happening in Donegal? How is andragogy, so popular among adult educators, of use to practitioners? What dilemmas do educators have in their teaching? What is it like to be an Irish educator in Losotho? What lesson can be learned from the experiences of family learning and citizenship? What thoughts, feelings, stories do educators have about their work that might be a rich source of insight?

A new Comment Section continues a conversation started in a previous edition about how we can be as critical of our own philosophy and activities as we sometimes are about the system and society. The journal has a number of book reviews.



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