

# gender and learning

A study of the learning styles of women and men and their implications for further education and training



Sheila O'Driscoll, Director

Shannon Curriculum Development Centre  
*Ionad Taighde agus Forbartha na Sionna*

# **gender and learning**



Peadar King & Sheila O'Driscoll

with

Stephanie Holden



**Commissioned by AONTAS on behalf of the  
Department of Education and Science.**



# **Rationale**

## *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*


### **Equality Objectives**

- Fair and inclusive society with strategic framework for action on equality.
- Supports for groups experiencing disadvantage and inequality.
- Lifelong learning.  
Examine women's and men's learning styles and needs and the implications for education and training.

# AIMS OF THE RESEARCH



- Explore styles of learning of men and women.
- Identify differences if any.
- Examine needs in relation to access to learning.
- Identify models of good practice.
- Recommendations on implications for further education and training.



*“I feel very strongly that this kind of analysis needs to be done. As educators, we must continually question what we are doing, how we are doing it and why.*

*Work like this enables practitioners to situate their work in a theoretical context and critique it and wonder about the future agenda for education”.*

(Curtis: 2001: pp. 63-64)

# THEORETICAL DEBATE



- Context for adult education.
- Continuum
- Functionalism and Critical Theory
- International Perspectives
- Learning Theories
- Pedagogy
- Experience of Schooling
- Empowerment
- Barriers to Participation

# RESEARCH METHODS



## Quantitative

- Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (1985)
- Allinson and Hayes Cognitive Style Index (1996)



## Qualitative Research

- Meetings with Adult Learners.
- Discussions with Tutors.
- Interviews with Service Providers/Agency Representative.

*“To listen to people as they describe how they understand the world in which they live and work” (Rubin: 1995: p.3)*

*“the art of interviewing is the art of conversation” Zweig (1965)*

# LOCATION OF RESEARCH

## Adult Learners

- Kilkenny
- Limerick
- Drogheda
- Leitrim
- Cork
- Tipperary
- Dublin
- Kilrush

**56 women**

**53 men**

## Tutors

- Limerick
- Dublin

# QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Kolb's L.S.I.

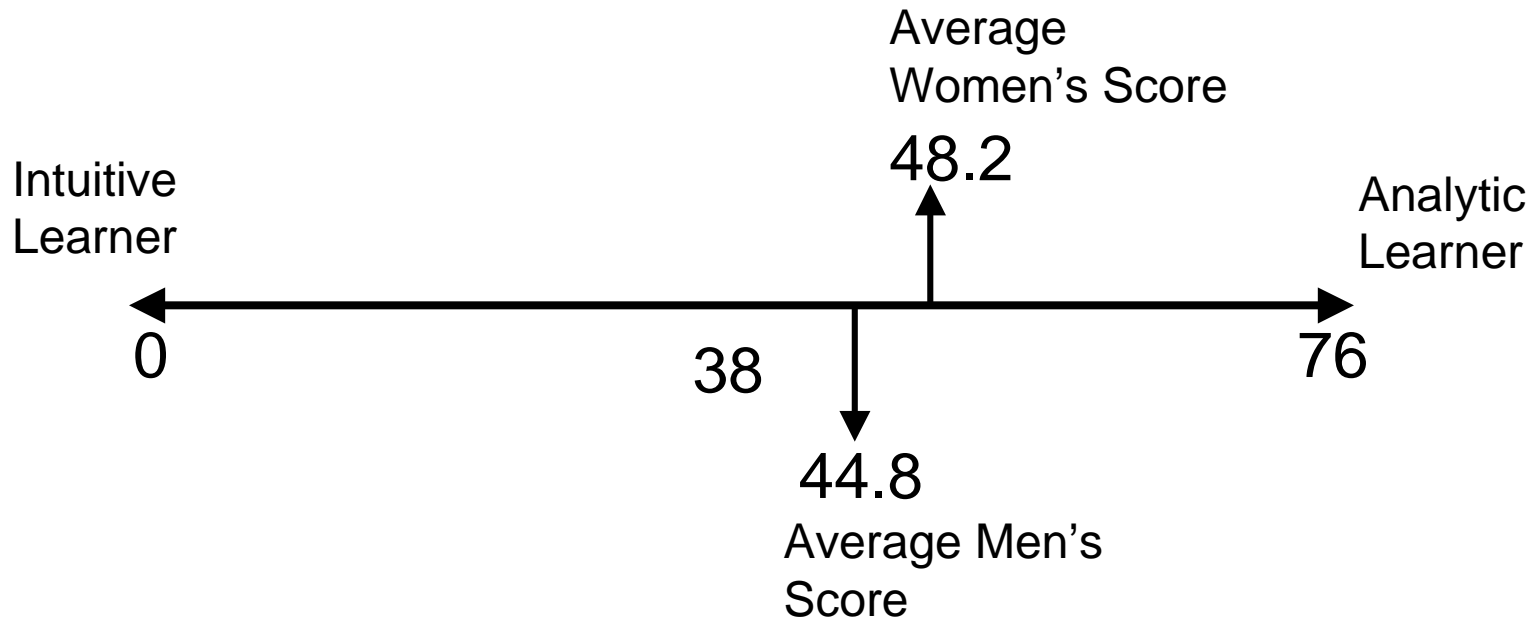
## Findings for Men

- Imaginative Learners – 24%
- Analytic Learners – 12%
- Common Sense Learners – 10%
- Dynamic Learners – 54%

## Findings for Women

- Imaginative Learners – 19%
- Analytic Learners – 2%
- Common Sense Learners – 5%
- Dynamic Learners – 74%

# Allinson and Hayes C.S.I.



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# ***Missing the Soaps for Maths***

The voices of the learners

# EXPERIENCE OF FORMAL EDUCATION



## **Social class and age, not gender:**

- *“I left school without learning to read or write you were just in the class. Most days I was left holding the door so it wouldn’t blow open, that was my job”.*
- *“We were just from the flats...[we] were given the teachers and the people from the house were given Christian Brothers ... we weren’t expected to do well”. (Niall)*

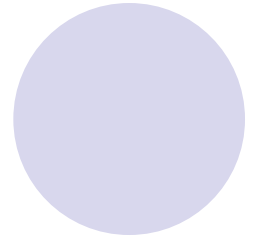
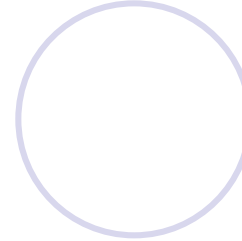
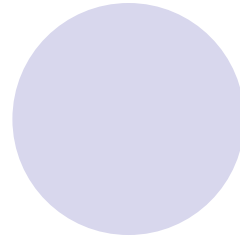
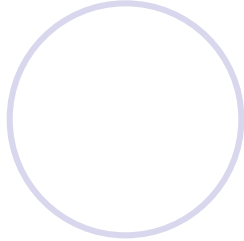
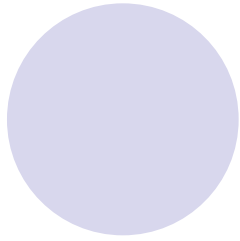
## **Women’s experience was similar.**

- *“Reliving the school again, it was miserable”*  
(Moira)



## Indifference and low expectations from teachers:

- *“They dumped the dunces back to the back and the good fellows up to the front”*. (Senan)
- *“The teacher we had would send us down to the shop. We would be an hour down there and he wouldn’t even ask (where we were)”*. (Declan)
- *“We weren’t expected to do well”*. (Niall)



- *“Their school experiences are so bad, so horrific that they think if they come back to education it will be the same”* (Mary Maher).
- *“Many people just associate education with fear”*. (Berni Brady)



## **Fear of physical punishment.**

- *“I used to be terrified going in. I was taught by nuns. I was sitting down the back of the class because I couldn’t do Maths. My school bag was emptied out and put over my head and my hands were tied behind my back”.* (Moira)

## **Men - palpable anger and severe criticism.**

- *“School it was bloody awful I hated it”.* (Killian)
- *“In school I wouldn’t ask questions. If I didn’t understand I just wouldn’t ask”.* (Declan)



## **Impact of Economic and Social Circumstances**

- The need for a job and money was given high priority. *“We had to actually leave school and go out working or actually had to stay in and look after the kids”*. (Eileen)
- *“The strawberry fields were more attractive, a little bit of money for night-time”*. (Cormac)
- Average school leaving age for women was 15, average for men was 13.



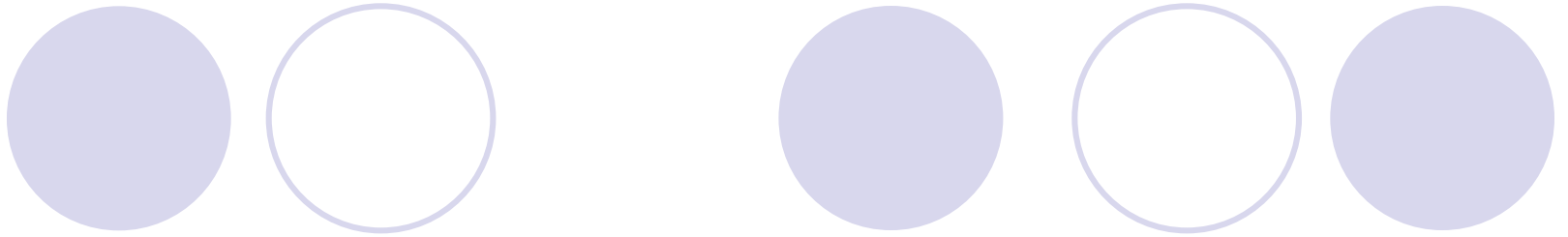
## Value of Work versus Education

- *“I wanted to make money”* (Manus).
- *“I wasn’t out of school six months and I wanted to go back but I had to work”* (Breda).
- Education not as valued for those remaining on the land *“My mother and father thought he doesn’t need any more. He’ll do.”* (Ultan)

# MOTIVATION TO RETURN TO LEARNING



- Children played a key role for both men and women. *“My children are my motivation because if I hadn’t got children I wouldn’t be here”*. (Breda)  
*“The kids would be coming in with homework and I didn’t understand it”*. (Rory)
- *“Many of the men have come back in order to help their children.”* (Tutor)



- Responsibility for children both a barrier and a motivator.
- A desire to learn and to prove they were capable of learning was also a factor. *“I just wanted to prove to myself that I could do it”*. (Charles)

The desire to improve literacy was also an important factor for both women and men.

# LEARNING AS AN ADULT

- Men's first day - fear, anxiety and embarrassment .

*“Am I going to stand out as being the worst?”*

(Charles)

*“You kept putting it off, I will go this week, I will go, I will go”*. (Niall)

- Women less fearful and focused on learning. *“I suppose we have good guts to come in here at our age”*. (Maeve)
- Women supported by other women.



- Men and women supported by their immediate families but for some men, friends were less supportive.

*“Some of them knocked me for it...they just couldn't get a grip on why I was doing it”*. (Charles)

- Jeering and slagging of men by neighbours and even the bus driver *“you're out with your school bag”*.

# BARRIERS

A decorative graphic at the top of the slide features a row of five circles. The first circle is solid light purple and partially overlaps the word 'BARRIERS'. The second circle is a light purple outline. The third circle is solid light purple. The fourth circle is a light purple outline. The fifth circle is solid light purple.

Men were more likely to identify barriers including:

- Access to information – recruitment by word of mouth.
- Locational barriers and distance from learning centres.
- Cost and bureaucracy.
- Lack of confidence.



- *“Invisible pressures for women not just trying to fit in cooking the dinner, the other little kind of pressures like what are you doing that for, your place is here in the home”*. (Tutor)
- *“I know how hard it is to try to be everything”*. (Tutor’s personal experience).
- Stigma for men. *“Issues around men’s identity and what they regard as essential to being a man, that education is soft in some way, while for women education is a positive thing to do”* (Berni Brady)



- Getting farmers to access education dependent on mothers. *“The father is afraid he might lose that extra pair of hands. If I can get to the mother in those situations I am pushing an open door”*. (Tutor)
- Noticeable difference in women in agricultural education *“they are very committed for a physical job that hasn’t been particularly open to women, they want to do it and they have a focus in their lives”*. (Tutor)

# RETURNING TO EDUCATION

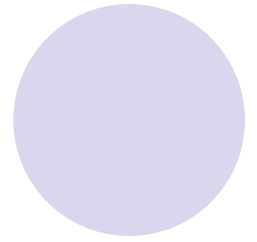
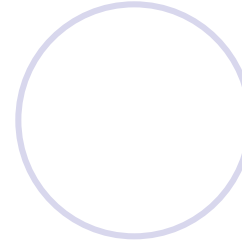
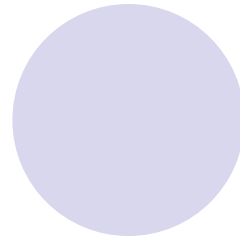
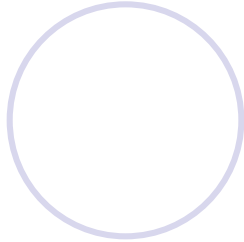
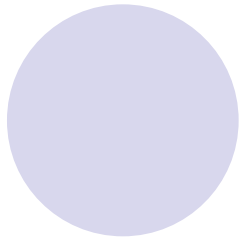
*“I find a difference inside myself...I never thought I would be able to do any of that”.*

(Dermot)

- *“You are learning and you don’t really realise you are learning”.* (May)
- *“What I like about here is you work to your own ability”.* (Moya)

# THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- Importance of non-pressurised, non-judgemental, relaxed, non-intimidatory atmosphere with teachers who were “*tolerant, understanding, with a great sense of humour and feeling your teacher believes in you*” (Rossa)
- Tutors’ conditions, staff turnover, lack of inservice, absence of permanent career structure.
- Informal setting with groups of 10-15 (echoed by tutors).

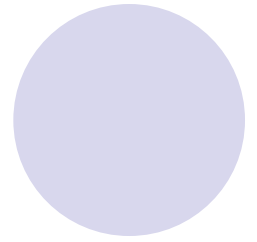
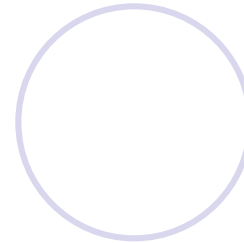
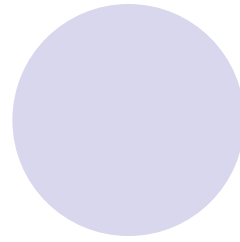
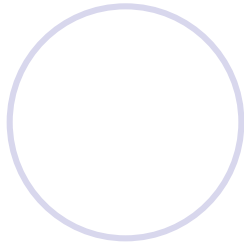
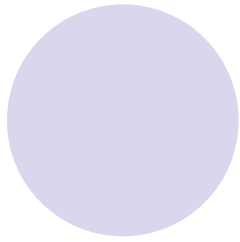


- Gender groups “*Men would be embarrassed with women there, I don’t mind asking questions if there is a man there*”. (Eoin)
- Men’s use of technology, women - more functionalist.
- “*Women are more interested in the process of learning and enjoying the sessions*”. (Tutor)
- Some men find experiential learning embarrassing “*Why do you want us to do this?*” (Tutor)

# ENGAGEMENT



- Women have no difficulty asking questions but men felt difficulty admitting they did not know something. *“The men are great at getting you outside the room if they want to know something”*. (Tutor)
- Resistance by men to personal disclosure *“I like to keep my personal life to myself, the word personal is your own so I like to keep it to myself”*. (Bertie)
- Regular feedback and testing of progress.



- Learning work at home.
- Men- impatient learners. *“You see the frustration building up in the men more and that will be it, whereas the women will go on more”* (Tutor).
- *“You literally see men switch off whereas women interrupt and ask questions”* (Tutor)
- *“The embarrassment thing is huge for men”.*

# TASK ORIENTATED LEARNING

- *“Having a project I think is tremendous. The men are working on a book”*. (Tutor)
- *“Men need to feel that it is all going somewhere, [they] expect a product at the end of it”* (Berni Brady)
- Low participation by men in the life of the Centre  
*“they don’t want to get involved in the Centre other than attend their classes so they come and go more”*. (M. Maher)
- *“Adults can have unrealistic expectations of what they can achieve in the time frame they have clear goals but they want it now.”* (Tutor)

The slide features a decorative arrangement of six light purple circles. Three are in the top row: an outline circle on the left, a solid circle in the middle, and a solid circle on the right. Three are in the bottom row: a solid circle on the left, a solid circle in the middle, and an outline circle on the right. A horizontal dotted purple line is positioned below the top row of circles, passing behind the text.

# Acknowledgements

# ADVISORY GROUP



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# ADULT LEARNERS AND TUTORS

- Ballyphehane C.D.P., Cork
- Drogheda Partnership
- Dublin Adult Learning Centre
- Kilkenny Adult Education Centre
- Limerick Adult Education Centre
- Leitrim Men's Group
- Newport, Tipperary Adult Education Centre
- TEAGASC, Kilrush, Co. Clare

# SERVICE PROVIDERS AND AGENCY REPRESENTATIVE

- Mary Beggan, Manager, Social Inclusion and Equal Opportunities, (FAS);
- Berni Brady, Director, AONTAS;
- Eileen Curtis, Adult Education Organiser, Co. Kilkenny;
- Mary Maher, Director, DALC;
- Thomas Woulfe, Director of Education, Teagasc, Co. Clare.