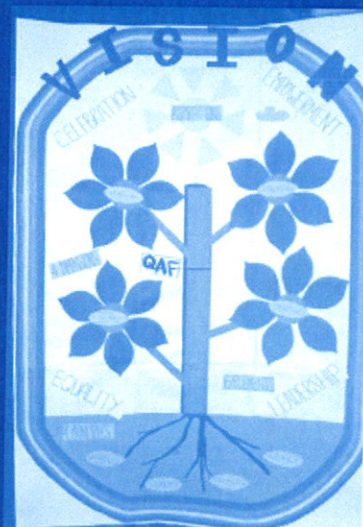


Women's Community Education in Ireland

By Bríd Connolly



Part 3

Popular Education and Biography

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Introduction

Women's community education in Ireland is remarkable, primarily because it manages to bridge the gap between the personal and political in a tangible way. Education, as a central institution in society, is regarded as the key route to the redistribution of society's resources and adult education is increasingly seen as the way in which the benefits of education can be . The White Paper, *Learning for Life* (DES, 2000) places particular emphasis on the role of adult education in addressing the social and economic needs of Irish society, especially given Ireland's lower levels of education and qualification compared to most other OECD countries (ibid.: 34). Adult education also has a role enriching lives, encouraging learning for its own sake, and mobilising the not-for-profit and social enterprise sectors to foster creative and innovative development.

In this chapter, I draw on my experiences within women's community education. I explore the underlying thinking in pedagogical approaches (Connolly, 1999), and in the concept of really useful knowledge, (Thompson, 1996). I look at the implications for education provision in the Academy, in the light of the discussion.

Women's Community Education

Women's community education has, to use Linda Connolly's (1997) phrase, 'mushroomed' to become a measurable, influential force in Irish society, enabling the engagement of ordinary women with the women's movement, in a meaningful way. It has enabled women to see themselves as active participants in Irish society, women who might otherwise, through socialisation, perceive themselves as operating within the private sphere only. It has emancipated women to a level of citizenship, which they have hitherto been denied, in spite

of the legal and social changes which resulted from the 1971 Commission on the Status of Women, and Ireland's membership of the European Union.

For myself, I consider that women's community education movement has enabled me to be active, reflective and to develop a sense of real purpose. My initial contact with women's community education was as a tutor/facilitator and my approach endeavoured to value all participants, including myself, while interrogating the beliefs and attitudes that we held. The educational environment was designed to enable participants to think and feel in a significantly different way. I subsequently identified closely with bell hooks' engaged pedagogy:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students (hooks, 1994: 13).

Community Education and Community Development

AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education, in its policy document, *Community Education* (2000), indicates the strong inter-relationship between community education and community development. Both have a strong, coinciding underpinning philosophy, but, while community development may be perceived as an alternative political process, with the aim of bringing about social change, it lacks a clear vision of how to enable people to work collectively. Community education, with the focus on methods and processes, and really useful knowledge, has incorporated the 'how' and 'what' with the 'why'.

Community Education is a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. ... It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation within the community. (AONTAS, 2000: 6)

The White Paper highlights the non-statutory nature of community education. It locates it within the community, emphasising its flexible, problem-solving, process orientated focus, promoting participative democracy, leading to the transformation of society (DES, 2000: 113). Community education is founded on Freirean principles of praxis and conscientisation. Freire's work in community-based education challenges power relations, while simultaneously situating education at the centre of social change (Freire, 1986). AONTAS identifies two intended outcomes, which are interconnected: firstly, the personal acquisition of skills, knowledge and further directions, and, secondly, social and community empowerment and advancement (2000: 7).

The pedagogical approach is dialogical and reflexive. Women's community education encompasses the practice of consciousness raising. Conscientisation and consciousness raising are primarily experiential processes encompassing the emotional, psychological, and cognitive. (Connolly, 1996). Women's community education goes further, towards emancipatory education, the process which enables people to raise awareness, to reflect and to bring about change (ibid.: 38).

In addition, it develops the microcosmic experience of inclusion and influence (Rogers, 1967). Relationship or person-centred process is at the heart of social analysis and education for politicisation. Freire (1986) sees it as pivotal to the task of overturning oppressive relationships. Hope and Timmel (1995: 29) take the view that this is a vital part of adult education, vital in the building of unity and commitment.

Social inclusion is at the basis of the state interventions designed to address inequality. Thus, the women's community education movement became part of the general inclination towards community development as a way of meeting the needs of marginal, excluded groups. It is a deeply political way of being. It endeavours to provide participants with the tools to exercise their own power and it helps to overcome the problems of shared leadership such as stagnation, disunity, accountability, and running out of steam.

The basic methodology of engaged, emancipatory pedagogies and community development is person- or relationship-centred group work, which is founded on principles of inclusion, influence and positive regard. Elsewhere, (Connolly, 1999), I evaluate this from a feminist

perspective, but the point that I wish to make here is that person-centred group work has been refined and enriched by the practice in women's community education.

Key Features in Women's Community Education

There are several key features in the women's community education movement, which have emerged over its lifetime of twenty years or so. Firstly, the participants own it. Key women set up daytime classes in their own areas, using local accommodation, maintaining ownership of the process. Secondly, it is underpinned by the notion of agency, sisters doing it for themselves. The need for outside agency is reduced, and self-reliance and control is enhanced. The founders and organisers are agentic in that they maintain control as far as possible, working with Adult Education Organisers, co-ordinators and other local people. In this way, they have been able to manage the process in the way they wanted.

Thirdly, they are focused on themselves as subjects. The curriculum and process of the education are women-centred, making their own experiences, interpretations and insights the basis of all the learning. Consciousness raising, beginning with the analysis of lived experiences and subjectivity, is a distinct shift away from the principle that knowledge is located through logical objectivity. Ryan (1999) draws our attention to women's ways of knowing, which are not essentially different from other ways of knowing. Rather, women have different experiences, ways of learning and knowing because of social construction.

The fourth feature is the way in which the facilitation of the groups remains in the hands of the groups. While the content of courses may be determined, to some extent, by academic and other factors, the way in which it is imparted remains in the control of the participants. These kinds of processes brought about the development of human-centred, empowering methodologies.

Another outcome is the way the groups identify with each other. This identification of common interests, the development of collectivity, highlight the social, political and cultural impact of the phenomenon. The failure of representational, traditional democracy has allowed room for this type of political activity, evident in grass roots responses to globalisation and development. Women's community education is part of the spectrum of community

developmental organisations, whereby people themselves, encompassing difference and diversity, organise and work to meet their own needs.

Popular Education and Community Education

The practice of popular education is underdeveloped in Ireland. However, there are parallels between community education and popular education. Community education, like popular education, is rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people. It is committed to progressive social and political change, based on the clear analysis of the nature of inequality, exploitation, and oppression. Obviously, the focus of women's community education is the emancipation of women, in the belief that this will contribute to a more equal society for everyone. As such, it is overtly political and critical of the status quo.

The curriculum is based on the concrete experiences and material interests of people in communities and pedagogy is group based rather than individual learning and development. Finally, it seeks to connect the local with the global (Crowther, Galloway and Martin, 2001).

The main point of departure is the concept of the individual. In community education, the person is perceived as the agent of social change, in collective activity. It is understood that consciousness raising enables the individual to identify with and connect to others within the same group, class and/or gender. In community education, personal change is necessary in order to overcome the constraints of socialisation, of passive, unquestioned acceptance of the status quo.

In women's community education this is a key factor. Feminism in Ireland is seen as negative, as an oppressive, extreme doctrine imposed from without. In addition, the backlash has made deep inroads into the Irish psyche, with anti-feminist voices gaining ground, particularly in men's groups, which are based on the model of women's community education (!). O'Donovan and Ward, (1999) found that women were reluctant to describe themselves as feminist in women's community education, because of ambivalent attitude to feminism.

While it was felt that feminism was good for women, individual feminists gave women a 'bad name' (ibid. 96). This is a very complex issue. It strongly indicates that social movements can be perceived as the work of individuals, e.g., individual feminists. The collective nature of the social movement is overshadowed by the influence of strong personalities, especially those who can be pilloried by the popular media. Community education grapples with this: the

connection between the personal and the political is facilitated by equal focus on each. At times, and in some circumstances, the personal is elevated at the expense of the political. This is particularly the case in the liberal discourse. However, both are held in balance as an outcome, in radical community education. This has implications for education provision in other contexts, and will be discussed below. The key issue, in this section, has been the place of the individual, and I am arguing that emancipatory education is facilitated when the person is clearly in the picture. The notion of agency is central to this: collective action is not always sustainable unless individuals perceive themselves to have influence and power. Democracy is contingent on individual power; effective forms of political activity rests on the assumption that people are acting on their own behalf. Participative democracy, which I argue elsewhere is the logical outcome of community development,(see Connolly, 1996), is based on the premise of empowered, knowledgeable, individuals working collectively towards social change. Communitarianism as a concept is emerging in the political arena (Bell, 1995). Community education is based on the core idea that people in society have responsibility for and to one another. This is essential when linking the local with the global, and underpins the recent demonstrations against the negative effects of globalisation. In many ways, women's community education is part of this overall grassroots activity. Again, in O'Donovan and Ward, women perceived that they should be involved in campaigning, e.g., for a cleaner environment or in solidarity with women of the Third World. Interestingly, this was not perceived as 'political activity', indicating a negative attitude towards politics, that political activity was something that politicians did, rather than women like themselves (pp. 98-99). Thus, while popular education and community education have a large overlap, in Ireland there is a distinct lack of work on what Thompson calls 'really useful knowledge', knowledge for politicisation. The academy has been responsible for trying to theorise this phenomenon in its own terms. Popular and community education may need to forge a new language, so that people can accurately speak about themselves in their own voices with their own words.

Implications for Other Education Provision

The influence of women's community education on adult and community education has been widely significant. Its methodologies have adopted by training agencies, in secondary schools, in tutorials at third level, and so on. In particular, the continuing education of marginal groups has been influenced by the methods and content of women's community education. The continuing education provision, known as extra-mural courses, in the Centre for Adult and Community Education, Maynooth, clearly shows this trend.

Community education is viewed as an approach rather than merely a system of provision (DES, 2000).

It is located in the community, with local groups taking responsibility. These groups are formed around community issues and benefit by responding to the issues locally. Again, it is based on an empowering process, underpinned by the concept of equality. The question of power distribution is central, and the location of control ensures that it maintains an aspiration towards empowerment. This necessarily means that it becomes an agent of social change. Every shift away from centrality and towards the local response is another dent in hierarchical power structures. Finally, it is modelled on active participation and inclusive decision-making. This is a bottom-up, grass roots process. The key players are those who participate in the educational project, rather than those holding authority or social power.

Community Education: The Glass Fence

A top-down approach, on the other hand, creates consumers, rather than participants or agents. For many FÁS¹ trainees, people with disabilities, unemployed men, Travellers, and other groups who lack social power, education and training is generally provided with the 'top-down' approach, i.e. the training agency, curriculum development unit, determines the needs of the target group and designs a programme to meet these needs. Community education is radically different in this respect, educating the participants to become agents of their own learning, i.e. to develop a critical awareness of structures, systems, assumptions and knowledge.

In contrast, groups using a top-down approach are not encouraged to participate as the equals of their tutors and to become agents of their own learning. The top-down approach may use active learning methods, but stays firmly within the dominant discourse of liberal education, which Kathleen Lynch (1989) has shown convincingly ensures the continuance of the status quo.

A glass fence separates community education and mainstream education, a glass fence that is similar to the glass ceiling, which prevents advancement through hierarchical organisations. Here, the glass fence allows observers to look through at new methodologies, while remaining

disengaged from the philosophy underpinning those developments. The mainstream can look in through the fence, see the participatory pedagogical approaches and then adapt them to their own environments. Likewise, those involved in community education can be encouraged by the apparent adoption of participative methodologies by the mainstream. However, the glass fence keeps the groups apart and ensures that the influence of participative methodologies on the mainstream is only superficial. Furthermore, the glass fence isolates community education and makes it easy for the mainstream to scrutinise and control its development.

This glass fence is also a constraining force, against which social movements may collide, when they offer resistance to the status quo. The glass fence around community education has been erected by the dominant discourses, which represent the aims of existing privileged interests, ensuring that the dividends of belonging to the dominant groups remain intact. Inside the glass fence, the empowering processes may enable people to perceive themselves in a completely different light, giving them the wherewithal to critically analyse their condition, and subsequently, to deconstruct traditional social relations. But the glass fence endeavours to ensure that these developments remain within and do not seriously challenge the status quo. It is difficult, to exert wider influence. We have seen many changes in Irish society, yet the continuance of deep divisions is further evidence that the formidable establishment forces that oppose emancipatory change remain in control. In spite of the explicit agenda of education as the route to the redistribution of resources, the current glass fence ensures that the processes of community education are contained and are not replicated in other education contexts.

Community education is not a series of techniques which can be reproduced in any context or setting. Those who participate in women's community education find that the visible is only part of the process. The groupwork that forms a key part of community education is based on a distinct philosophical position. Although this position may not always be stated explicitly, it is important to recognise, in Freire's words, that neutrality is not possible. It is well documented that not all women participating in community education would describe themselves as feminist, but they would agree that the process is liberating: they become empowered, enabled and freer by their participation in it. The tendency is towards an enhanced social position, with more access to power and resources.

However, these processes are sometimes applied in other contexts where there is no such agenda. In particular, education and training for disadvantaged people is underpinned by the notion that employment is the key to participation, resources, and independence. The changes in Irish society as a result of feminist progress, from the 1970's onward, have been hugely significant. Community education has provided the forum for many women to engage with the meaning of these changes, by disseminating the consequences of the legal and social changes and assisting women to apply them to their own lives. It has enabled the benefits of the women's movement to be available to all women, ensuring that they did not remain at the mercy of the patriarchal dividend. The implications for other groups are similar. It should be possible for marginalised individuals and groups to use community education to relocate themselves in Irish society. However, while local issues may be addressed in this way, it is very difficult to tackle questions of national significance. In addition, feminism has so many implications for personal relationships, and for traditional roles, that women have to overcome resistance from disparate and suspicious individuals and groups where they might otherwise have expected to find allies.

Community Education for Community Development

Community education has proven itself to be vital for community development. The pedagogical approach in community education identifies the group as the key resource. Person-centred group work is consequently pivotal to the process and has potential for wider applications. My own work in education for community development is premised on this concept of group work as an emancipatory adult education methodology. Process-orientated community development is also dependent on group work as a methodology, especially in the light of the work of Community Action Network (Kelleher and Whelan, 1992). This process-orientated aspect contrasts with other models of community development, in particular economic or structural models.

As a practitioner, some of my work entails organising a community education programme for persons within those communities who wish to consolidate their skills in community development. This programme is funded by Area Based Partnerships—the mechanism put in place to disburse EU funding for development—and some voluntary agencies. The groups are mixed, comprising men and women of all ages and backgrounds.

We have endeavoured to gender proof the course modules and to create an environment suitable for emancipation. It is underpinned by community development principles, i.e. people coming together to provide for their own needs, thereby bringing about change in the institutions at cultural and social levels. The participants are both the subjects and the authors of the whole process.

The evaluation of this programme highlighted a number of very interesting gender issues. It is very striking that, of all social inequalities, gender has remained the most contentious. This depends on the strand of community development with which the participants identify. Two strands in particular throw up this gender aspect. Traditional rural development, which is largely about modernisation and bringing the benefits of technological and economic developments to rural Ireland, it is a force for dominant political and economic development in more conservative rural communities. While the position of women may shift from the traditional role of private, unpaid labour, to a more public, waged one, the fundamental gendered social divisions are not countered by this shift. In addition, it is perceived that the aspiration to equality undermines the facets of rural life that the development seeks to retain as foundational precepts, for example, farming as a male occupation, and the 'farm home' as the female sphere of influence. Tourism, one of the key economic developments, is positioned within this gender divide (see Pat O'Connor, 1998).

The second strand of community development which has gender implications is the urban labour movement based one. This sees class as the fundamental inequality. Feminism is perceived as a middle-class phenomenon and therefore part of the problem. Gendered divisions are perceived as secondary to class. Feminism, according to this strand, undermines efforts to seek fundamental change. Within this strand community responses have emerged recently that are very patriarchal and structured and which concern themselves with solving community problems, such as drug misuse and joyriding, sometimes through violence. In some of these cases, initiatives set up by women to respond to these issues have been colonised by such groups.

Another factor, which has emerged more recently, is part of the broader cultural and social discourse. The anti-feminist backlash is gaining a foothold. The powerlessness which many men feel as a result of the economic and social changes is now attributed to the women's movement, with the argument that feminism has gone too far. The changes in parenting, in

personal relationships, in the distribution of jobs and employment are perceived as detrimental forces which undermine men as a group and masculinity. The anti-feminist men's movement voices these concerns, blaming the women's movement for the changing role of men in family life. Further, it holds that women's employment and the demand for childcare is strengthening capitalist economic values in Irish society, but it overlooks the role that successive governments, financial institutions and social policy has played in establishing the liberal economics which prevail. This thinking is percolating through to some men's groups, who are using group work, community development and adult education to build a men's movement which aims to counter the progress made by the women's movement. It is important to point out, though, that not all men's groups are anti-feminist. I merely want to document the anti-feminist backlash and how it is relevant here. This thinking serves to confirm the anti-emancipatory practices current in some community development and education. This phenomenon needs careful analysis in research dedicated specifically to it.

There is also a problem with the way in which funding is acquired. While some funding partnerships are very supportive of this model of emancipatory education, other funders insist that provision is underpinned by an economic model of community development. While some economic models, particularly those underpinned by community enterprise, do succeed in raising awareness and consciousness, the mainstream economic models adhere to and reinforce traditional thinking.

However, whatever the model of community development, all have important positive features. The impact of women's community education on the participants is enormous, with women reporting change in their lives, enhanced self-confidence and esteem, and a sense that they are emerging from, evading and overturning domesticating cultural imperatives. Participants of other provision report these personal changes also. It is at the social and cultural levels that more action need to be taken to bring about the redistribution of resources and the changing of institutions.

Conclusion

This chapter has endeavoured to explore the implications of women's community education for participants, and to assess its potential to bring about fundamental personal and social change. I have examined emancipatory processes which endeavour to bring about personal change and to equip participants to engage with the cultural and social discourses which form

a barrier to emancipation. While the philosophy of community education may not have had an explicit feminist agenda, the women's community education movement has ensured that all thinking on adult education and lifelong learning is influenced by its creativity and innovation. The links between popular education and women's community education are explored and perhaps the ground has been prepared for further work, which I look forward to.

This chapter also considered women's community education as a conduit for engaging with the impact feminism has had on Irish women, and the way in which the effects can be seen in public life, as well as in private. I have emphasised that these lessons could be transferred to other contexts, especially through community development. However, the evaluation of a community development programme showed that gender remains a highly contentious issue, in spite of gender proofing. It highlighted a number of strands of community development, which have gender implications, stressing the need for further study. In particular, this chapter pointed out that emancipatory, transformative pedagogies, when they are enabled to happen, need to embody a critical feminist aspect, without which women will find themselves in subordinate roles, once again.

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