

SECTION THREE

Book Reviews

A new skills agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness

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From where I sit, it could seem a strange time to be reviewing a European Commission document published just before the Brexit vote last June. However, 'A New Skills Agenda' is important for a number of reasons wherever you live in Europe. Firstly, it sets the agenda for the use of European funded programmes. Secondly, its analysis of the challenges that Europe faces and the proposed solutions need to be discussed and, in some cases, challenged by adult educators and learners. It argues that European countries, whether they are in the EU or not, face a similar set of challenges that the publication highlights in its introduction.

At the outset, we learn that "70 million Europeans lack adequate reading and writing skills." Even more have poor numeracy and digital skills. "More than half of the 12 million long-term unemployed are considered low-skilled." This is the sort of analysis that is very high-level and open to challenge. For example, at last December's European Commission conference on this subject, some adult educators questioned the use of 'low-skilled' to refer to people who lacked qualifications. Not being qualified, it was argued, did not equate with not having skills. We may lack some skills – literacy, numeracy, digital – but we can still bring up our children and put a cross on a ballot paper. Reasons for unemployment, or insecure employment, may not be wholly down to our skill levels.

But at the macro-level these things are critical, as 'A New Skills Agenda' highlights. In the city-regions I work with, skills gaps and mismatches are undoubtedly important, as is graduate under-employment (that is, working below one's level of competence), female under-employment, ageing workforces, as well as the basic skills challenges highlighted above.

The introductory analysis also recognises that “people increasingly learn in settings outside formal education – online, at work, through professional courses, social activities or volunteering.” This is a document with few citations so there is no evidence cited as to how the authors know there is more non-formal learning out there. However, I felt it was good to recognise that non-formal learning was important not just in terms of scale but in terms of how adults, particularly those with a negative experience of school, want to learn.

Many practitioners will cheer when they read the paragraphs that address the need for learning that is relevant to people’s lives as well as businesses. At a European level this could be addressed by more sensitive and nuanced use of European Social Fund, the Regional Development Fund, and Erasmus+. At a national level, how member states take on board this advice is up to them.

For British and Irish audiences, ‘A New Skills Agenda’ outlines a familiar narrative sometimes referred to ‘it’s the economy, stupid!’ That is, the principal role of adult education is to help people find employment and progress at work. The benefits that accrue from participating in adult learning are similar to those from being in work. Prosperity touches all part of our lives. ‘A New Skills Agenda’ sits very much within the employment and work strand, but it also recognises that gaining ‘soft’ and transferable skills (“the ability to work in a team, creative thinking and problem solving”) can be achieved through non-formal learning. Moreover, such courses (it might be family or community learning) should be recognised and validated as providing those skills and competences.

‘A New Skills Agenda’ resonates profoundly with a key finding of the report ‘Learning Through Life’ (2009) where such life-wide skills were termed capabilities. Here, Schuller and Watson proposed a Citizens’ Curriculum approach that has since been developed in England with government funding and support from Erasmus+. More recently the approach has been proposed as part of an entry-pathway where adults gain civic, social, financial and digital capabilities alongside basic skills learning. In a similar vein, ‘A New Skills Agenda’ calls for “upskilling skills pathways” but has little to say as to how this could be achieved.

In a sense, it is up to member states (and their devolved administrations) as to how they achieve this. The cities I have worked with recognise the principle of inclusive growth: economic growth that reduces social inequalities. This becomes critical when it becomes harder, for whatever reason, to import labour

from other parts of Europe. Joined up approaches to government mean another aim of skills provision is to reduce benefit claims and demands on the health service. So, when adults decide they want to do a course on healthy eating, or anti-bullying, or glass-painting, or social media, you should go with their wishes.

There is a lot in ‘A New Skills Agenda’ to work with: a recommendation to look at what are the ‘key competences’ that adults need; how provision should be co-designed with employers and learners; the focus on digital skills (for adults, for adult educators, for the workplace); the mapping of qualifications across borders; skills profiling for migrants; strategies for specific industrial sectors (often multi-nationals); a better understanding of graduate employment and the ‘brain drain’ away from smaller countries and cities.

In setting the agenda going forward, this short document’s final pages propose: more work-based and workplace learning and better links with industry; more support for learners moving between nations; and, more done to recognise the value of non-formal and informal learning. In order to do this, ‘A New Skills Agenda’ argues, that adult educators need to be supported more, and higher education modernised. In other words, the skills gaps and mismatches are not just at the so-called lower levels! In adult and higher education, we are not just an ageing workforce, we need to improve our skills. Let’s just hope the funding follows the identification of need.

So, ‘A New Skills Agenda’ is worth a quick read. It has the benefit of brevity but also its drawbacks. It is very high-level, as one would expect, and comes from a social market, some might say neo-liberal, perspective. But it is also a good taster because it should encourage us to look further into the Commission’s arguments and challenge them as well as our own perspective. In this, you might say, wherever we are in Europe, we face a common agenda. What is done about it is, for the most part, up to individual nation states (or devolved administrations). But in looking at the commonality of challenges, pan-European bodies such as the Commission, can also advocate for commonalities of approach. If there is one common agenda, it could be argued, there should also be a common approach. What is more, if there is a shared agenda, one might argue for a shared approach, where adult educators from across Europe come together to learn from each other.

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Community education and neoliberalism: Philosophies, practices and policies in Ireland

CAMILLA FITZSIMONS,
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2017
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Despite the use of the term neoliberalism in its title, this is a highly readable book which explores a range of interconnected themes relating to community education in Ireland. A central argument put forward is that Ireland has shifted towards a model of free-market economics and that the resulting neoliberalisation has inculcated 'a business logic' into public and community spaces, and resulted in a political system that prioritises the economy above everything else.

Fitzsimons, a community education practitioner as well as an academic, brings the full force of her experience and expertise to bear in this book, described as the first major study of community education in Ireland. A mixed-methods approach is adopted, with theoretical analysis of core concepts under investigation, including community education and neoliberalism; along with three phases of field research which was undertaken between 2011 and 2013. The data generated through engagement with practitioners is problematised through theory and then made available to the field as an aid to reflection and analysis. The stated purpose of this book is to encourage practitioners 'to embody a more political approach where community education is seen as a democratic process that is part of the struggle for equality'. In so doing, Fitzsimons provides a comprehensive, critical account of the history, development and current state of community education in Ireland today.

The book is bisected into Part I: Community Education, Philosophies and Practices and Part II: The Neoliberalisation of Community Education. Chapters 2 to 4 interrogate, in turn, community education theories, the experience of community education in Ireland and theories of learning. Outlining the history of community education, Fitzsimons traces its development through

public provision since the early 1970s and via more independently managed community based organisations in the 1980s and 1990s. A broad description of community education – any localised, structured adult learning that happens outside of traditional institutions such as schools and colleges – is built on with definitions which include underpinning egalitarian principles and the potential to actualise citizens’ rights ‘through collective, praxis-oriented approaches that encourage systemic change.’ Clearly advocating for the latter, she argues that much community education in Ireland has been depoliticised through the predominance of what she terms neoliberal logic, along with new public managerialism and social partnership. Increasingly community education has had to be justified and quantified in terms of value for money rather than in terms of capacity building and equality. Forced mergers and rationalisation processes within the community sector have ensured fewer resources and less control for local communities. She argues that one of the most insidious aspects of neoliberalism has been ‘the injection of business logic into the heart of (community education) practice.’

In turning her attention to philosophies of adult and community education she outlines both humanistic and more critical perspectives, drawing on the work of Freire, among others. Noting the absence of a patriarchal analysis in Freire’s work she enlists the theories of bell hooks and others to plug this gap. Whilst sympathetic to the real benefits of a humanistic approach, which supports change at an individual level, she nonetheless argues for a critical approach which is more concerned with social and structural change. Here she is somewhat out of step with a majority of research participants for, whilst an equality perspective is shared throughout their accounts, she notes that combined findings show a dominant humanistic philosophical leaning within education practice; fifty-six percent of research participants align themselves with a humanistic/person-centred approach. Her contention is that, whilst beginning with a person’s life experience is an important component of humanist education approaches, a critical approach seeks to contextualise these in the context of social, economic and cultural structures. As such it goes beyond being self-affirming or therapeutic; rather, it supports people to ‘act critically to transform reality.’

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 consider community education and its links with social policy on employment, accreditation and the professionalism debate. Here the dominant force of neoliberalism can be seen with its focus in education policy on continued economic growth to the neglect of community education’s

concern with issues such as equality and empowerment. Education in this context is increasingly seen as little more than an instrument for employability, and the space for non-accredited learning appears to be shrinking. Fitzsimons problematises the concept of professionalism, drawing our attention to the tensions inherent in compulsory qualifications for community educators and the valid, lived experience of practitioners. She argues that professionalism can confer greater esteem to what she terms 'authority from above' over other sources of authority such as, for instance, from those we work with. She links this discussion on professionalism with growing employment precarity (insecure job conditions associated with part-time and zero hour contracts), a feature of neoliberal policies. Exacerbating this is the tendency within accrediting bodies to prioritise technical skills over developing critical capacities.

The final Chapter 8, is a call to action, offering ways to think differently about the potential for community education to help people and communities 'to critically, creatively and collectively act to shape their own history.' Concluding the book on a high note, Fitzsimons contends that the current neoliberal context, characterised as it is by high levels of poverty and inequality, is not inevitable and that 'cracks' are developing as the 'contradictions of capitalism are becoming more difficult to explain away.' Based on her fieldwork she identifies a series of five proposals aimed at practitioners seeking change: continue to work with the state, but in a more strategic way; strengthen practitioner networks to lobby and advocate for change; re-politicise community education practice; engage in direct action and campaigning work; and showcase community education. More broadly she makes a case for what she terms the rekindling of community education. This, she argues, can be achieved by the incorporation of 'really useful practice', described as an educational approach that starts where the person is at but locates personal circumstances within collective structures, into community education work. The rekindling she advocates can also be secured through creating oppositional spaces for problematising and politicising issues and by 'lighting many fires' through expanding the principles of community education into less traditional community education spaces.

This book has a broad reach, ranging from the subjects outlined above to practical tips for the 'classroom' to the theories of Foucault and Gramsci. As such, it will certainly appeal to a wide audience and, I suspect, especially practitioners, helping those engaged in community education reflect critically on their practice and consider the opportunities for broadening the field and reinvigorating community education and its potential. Whilst the context

is Ireland, it incorporates a global range of concerns, making this book also of interest to a wider geographic and thematic readership. It is a valuable contribution to the theory and practice of community education and, arguably succeeds in its stated aim of ‘nudging practitioners towards a more radical way of working.’

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Inside Education: The art of good learning

STEPHEN O' BRIEN

ROUTLEDGE, 2016

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'Inside Education' takes the reader on a fascinating ethnographic journey to explore four distinct educational sites of practice, located in Ireland, New York and Brazil. These projects include: an all-Irish speaking, multi-faith primary school in Cork; an alternative post-primary school in Waterford for those who leave (or are left behind by) the formal education system; a highly competitive early college secondary school in Queens, New York for disadvantaged students and finally; an adult education training centre in Brazil that works with members of the landless movement. The book is organised into four distinctive chapters. Each resembles an ethnographic case study on the respective themes of: learning identity, personal learning, learning success and learning power.

Readers will experience an accessible but rich narrative drawing on: participant stories, educational theory, and scholarly interrogation of practice in each context. Critical theorists including: Freire, Bourdieu, Foucault, Arendt and Vygotsky enrich the exploration. Together the four case-studies raise many profound questions about educational practice. One of these concerns the dual positioning of teachers as workers both with the system (state workers) and workers against the system (cultural workers). The Freirean philosophy that education is politics; "Who am I favouring when I teach and what am I working against?" has resonance throughout.

In chapter one, the location is Mayfield, Cork City (at Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn) where the author explores the theme of 'learning identity' through the lens of native culture, identity and language, in a school community whose 'temporary prefabs' capture the frequently arduous evolution of Gaelscoileanna in Ireland. The author explores parental motive for the inclusive, culturally diverse multi-faith Gaelscoil experience. The focus on: music, community, an

ethical education curriculum (Croí na Scoile), learning as fun, competition, a relational way of being, celebrating diversity and values based leadership, are hallmarks in the success of the stated and hidden curriculum.

Paradoxically, however, there is also evidence of traditional pedagogies of testing and formal assessment (regimes of measurement) sitting side by side with more innovative (identity shaping pedagogies), where sixth class children are given cameras to capture images which speak to their sense of place and belonging.

Chapter two moves to an alternative post-primary school in Waterford, founded by Nuala Jackson, known as the XLC Project. The project is inspired by the courageous leadership of its founder and a pragmatic educational philosophy based on humanist principles for success. Democracy, relationships, choice, motivation, praise and personal responsibility are conducive to personal learning. Nuala's principles and ethos are derived from her experience of working with disaffected students. Some 40% of XLC's students have been expelled or indefinitely suspended from school and an inclusive ethos caters for single parents, Travellers, asylum seekers and refugees. In 2012, one third of their leaving certificate cohort and almost half of their junior cycle cohort had some specific learning difficulty. Over a thirteen-year period 700 students have sat their leaving certificate with over 85% succeeding in passing five subjects or more.

Readers of this chapter may reflect on formal schools as sites of reproduction, typically favouring middle class cultures. They will therefore be intrigued with how the XLC project has created an alternative authentic culture without uniforms, compulsory attendance, reports or homework. Bourdieu (1988) and Foucault (1991) are suitably referenced to explore the relationship between power relations and conditions of possibilities and constraints.

Chapter three brings the reader to the Queen's School of Inquiry in (QSI) New York – but via a most interesting historical account of the ideals of American Independence and more contemporary neo-liberal discourses, linked to Friedman's economics; "The drive, imagination and energy of competitive free enterprise." (p. 75). The author explores learning success by playing out the frequent tensions between notions of choice and meritocracy; against the reality of restrictions, placed by social habitus in the search for equality (Bourdieu 1977). QSI is a small, early college secondary school, with a population of

approximately 600. Its mission is to prepare typically disadvantaged high school students for college, most of whom will be first generation college students. The stringent, competitive assessment regime contributes to a palpable work ethic. Students compete for valuable entry scholarships to university. Here teachers favour the simultaneously cooperative, yet competitive paradigm in preparation for the culture of success celebrated in New York.

The final chapter on the theme of learning power is situated in Brazil where opportunity and inequality are evident in the truth that a mere one percent of the population controls and owns 50% of the land and one fifth live beneath a low-threshold poverty line. The setting is an adult education centre, west of Recife (Centro de Formac o Paulo Freire Recife – birthplace to Paulo Freire) in Pernambuco. The project Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) is centred around the landless movement.

In MST, adult learner groups use a Freirean political literacy approach (critical reflection, dialogue and action) to co-create curriculum, to resolve issues of land ownership, crop rotation and environmentally friendly farm practices, while also mobilising a green education for sustainable development. The challenges of modernisation and agribusiness make this a challenging task to disrupt the unyielding power of the multinational and transnational corporation. Transformative learning can be a tortuous process but establishing cooperatives, gaining security for seasonal workers, establishing over 400 associations, producing clean foodstuffs, securing land ownership, housing, schools and health clinics are just some of the achievements of MST.

In conclusion, this publication unfolds significant questions for: teachers, teacher educators, researchers, sociologists, and policy makers. How do marginalised groups experience formal curriculum? What models of education work in different contexts? Where does power reside? Is it invisible and dispersed, held in institutions but also in relationships and embedded practices? How do educators reconcile their roles as cultural and state workers?

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Reframing partnerships in education: Uniting the power of place and the wisdom of people

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This book's main purpose is to encourage all educators to improve the social fabric of communities by encouraging the use of Community Learning Exchange (CLE) pedagogies. It further claims that through such participatory practices and collective leadership models, the outcomes will culminate in the building of stronger communities and advanced learning for all. Its strength lies in the explanation of the CLE and Relationships, Assets, Stories, Place, Politic, Action (RASPPA) model which, rooted in the Freirean (1971) 'problem-posing' model, highlights a number of 'light bulb' moments that serve well to demonstrate individual self-awakening moments.

Section 1 sets out the purposeful aim of 're-framing schools and communities, changing bureaucratic communities and organisations, and those injustices found within institutes.' The authors claim that using the CLE (i.e. RASPPA) model, educators can co-construct solutions to challenges that emerge as a result of reflecting, and collectively empowering action for change. They describe this as the rhythm of CLE that culminates in it 'coming alive in multiple spaces and for varying purposes.' There are similarities to Gramsci's (1971) notion of 'organic intellectualism' in the call to create 'gracious space' within communities in order to perpetuate the axioms of RASPPA.

This next section explains the rationale, purpose and engagement pedagogies that the CLE model proposes to illuminate the core values of the five axioms that guide thought, practice and relationships. The role of leadership as a 'dynamic social process' is rooted as the means by which participants actively frame their learning. A number of strategies are suggested to support the development of relationship, such as play and creating safe spaces for dialogue. The authors emphasise the outpouring of experiences that assist people to find their voice

and power, thus generating a collective destiny. This is in fact one of the targets set for those who are trained in CLE, to infuse this model of questioning and injecting new hopes and innovations, that will hopefully be spread to other communities. This model seeks to 'invite the curiosity of the learners' and engender transformation by shifting the power balance with and in the local community, as a new way of addressing unresolved issues, all the while creating 'collective deviance.'

The authors' further postulate the shift in education occurring, when tutor and learner embark upon a journey of shared learning, which they refer to as 'crossing boundaries.' The claim of radical transformation from distress and hopelessness to hope and possibilities experienced through a dilemma is similar to Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformational learning where the individual comes seeking solution having been given the tools to discover their problem.

This next chapter focuses on the theory of change in action, moving away from community development that is based upon deficit thinking models, in favour of an asset building model, that encompasses school, parents, students and local community working collectively to address issues innovatively for positive change. The five axioms that are central to the CLE are explained here. The first is the relationship building where trust and life sustaining principles are developed in 'gracious space.' Asset building is crucial to the development of community building, inspiring people to work together for improved community life. Stories are the lifeblood of CLE where people tell their story, and have the 'gracious space' to re-frame and re-shape. When this is done collectively, the stories become part of the cathartic discipline with CLE. Place is an important aspect of CLE, as it is located at the crux of the teaching and learning process, that explores the concept of place as somewhere to play, create and celebrate, and incorporates home, neighbourhood and community. Inspiring and re-imagining can then be generated when participants are invited to critically reflect on their personal places. The final axiom of CLE 'action' promotes active citizenship through telling and re-telling of stories. This section includes testimonies from the authors, indicating how they personally changed, the institutions they connected with changed e.g. personal stories about the family, picture storytelling of a wake, asset mapping between university and community, encouraging intergenerational learning and 'family wisdom exchanges'; however, they do not offer any evidence of what those changes actually are.

The next section deals with story-making. The framework is the personal community, intersections of ecologies and axioms in lived experiences formalising and employing CLE pedagogies in public spaces. The claim here is that through these strategies, participants can re-author self, change organisations, transform communities and contribute to sustaining this healthy change. It concludes with an invitation to the reader to review these CLE pedagogies and in particular to develop an individual critical consciousness, that surfaces when the power of place and wisdom of people unite. The claim here is that when the participant understands their own needs they can begin the process of transformation.

The authors then address the notion of ‘teaching for learning, learning to teach’, proposing that knowledge and action are co-created by learners, teachers and community partners. They assert that this rests in the nature of application, where teaching and learning are interdependent and reciprocal. This, they state, brings about democratisation of learning. The dynamic critical pedagogies are listed as invitational, empowering, relational, engaging, experiential, impacting public and rejuvenating ways of learning within ‘gracious space.’

The next chapter gives an overview of pedagogies of reflection. Many of these, e.g. the circle method, appreciative listening protocol, journey line, world café and learning walks ‘meaningful conversations’ application and implementation and the inquiry method, are all tried and tested adult education pedagogies. Nevertheless, the step by step process is a helpful guide to the novice, as is the explanation of their theoretical underpinnings and merits.

The section on dynamic critical pedagogies with and in the community, illustrates the importance of digital engagement and digital story telling. The authors introduce the reader to the importance of global digital advances that critically impact learning environments and challenges educators to embrace new ways of communicating. They give some innovative examples such as the digi-hunt, which is a refreshing method to explore community issues. The more common well-known strategies such as community site visits, work in progress activity and community mapping, serve to illustrate the outworking of CLE strategies. This section expresses the success stories of CLE practices from an individual perspective.

The short conclusion to the whole book can be summed up as the CLE evangelical mission statement, which is ‘an invitation to imagine, a promise of

hope, an opportunity to think and a call to act!' The book will be of interest to those engaged in community development and especially adult educators who wish to develop models of democratising teaching and learning.

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