

SECTION TWO

Book and Policy Reviews

Book Review: *Education's Ecosystems: Learning through Life*

BERTRAM C. BRUCE

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REVIEWED BY LEO CASEY

One of the impairments to the development of discourse on education and lifelong learning is the paucity of conceptual models and the absence of a commonly agreed vocabulary for understanding. When we say learning happens in school, in college and throughout life; how can we make sense of that? Likewise, is education confined to the formal processes that lead to qualifications or is education something that arises from our experience of family, community and working life? These are the big questions of our time and much of the current debate is stifled by the limits of language and the absence of structure. Bertram Bruce's contribution, through *Education's Ecosystems Learning through Life*, provides a welcome and much needed set of conceptual tools to organise our thinking and challenge prevailing assumptions on education, learning and life.

Throughout the book Bruce argues for the idea of *learning ecosystem* as a means of better appreciating the qualities and characteristics of how learning happens in so many diverse ways and in such a wide variety of settings. He introduces the Ecosystems Learning Framework (ELF) as a means of inquiry on the nature of learning in diverse human settings. He suggests we 'think of a garden that cultivates the learner throughout the lifespan' (Bruce, 2020, p. 3). In this way we avoid the 'atomized' approach to learning that emphasises discrete elements and fails to appreciate the total picture and interactions between the parts. The notion of learning ecosystem is more than analogy, it draws on the methodologies of biology and the study of physical worlds, it suggests a means of analysis and a means of organising our thoughts on 'learning through life'.

Bruce takes us on a journey of understanding and appreciation for learning through the places, situations and communities he describes across the

globe. Insights from his own life experiences are woven across the wonderful, inquiry rich, settings of The Library Park in Medellín, Columbia, Gandhi's educational project in India, village squares in Patan, Nepal, and Paseo Boricua communities in Chicago. Memories from his youth and college days explain, in part at least, how his combined interest in science and learning arise. In one chapter he describes how one professor's introduction to the 'grand questions in biology' (Bruce, 2020, p. 16) perfectly tweaked the curiosity of students through dramatic lectures on living and dead frogs!

The ELF is used to analyse each of the global learning settings to produce a complete picture of the characteristics of learning through life. There are five components to the ELF: diversity in ways to learn, learning networks, emergent properties, finding and building learning niches and interpretation of learning ecosystems; through each of these lenses, we develop our sense of perspective on the organic nature of learning. The approach is useful and flexible with the elaboration of each one of the components in more detail through individual chapters.

Further chapters on the 'interpretation of learning spaces' and a dialogical approach to contrast formal and informal learning help to synthesise the work. In an elegant vignette Bruce describes aspects of the lifelong learning journey of Ati, an illustrator of children's books, graphic artist and teacher. As he summarises her life story he suggests '[i]n Ati's biography, formal learning is linked in multiple ways with other problems and activities, such as those that arise in parental work, libraries, and the economic, social, cultural, and political currents of the larger society. Her learning is a product of the education ecosystem, within which she co-creates learning niches' (Bruce, 2020, P. 113). This is the essence of the argument and the case for learning ecosystems.

The book works at many levels and this is entirely intentional. It is a menagerie of interesting facts and details; it is insightful, accessible, autobiographic and above all it is an appeal for wider reappraisal of our understanding of learning. Let the work begin.

References

Bruce, B. 2020. *Education's Ecosystems: Learning through Life*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Book Review: *Doing Critical and Creative Research in Adult Education: Case Studies in Methodology and Theory*

BERNIE GRUMMELL AND FERGAL FINNEGAN (EDS.)

ISBN: 978-90-04-42074-8

REVIEWED BY EVE COBAIN

How can adult education research engage deeply and collaboratively with diverse and often marginal communities in bringing about personal and social change? This question excites, and sometimes troubles, the authors of this deft and reflective essay collection.

In Part 1 of the book, the authors examine how biographical research, oral history and collaborative storytelling can provide access to new vistas of understanding – for both researchers and research collaborators or participants – in the context of adult learning. Essays consider the benefits and the challenges of working in this complex, intersubjective space but ultimately argue for a co-constructive approach, in which participants play a shaping role in every phase of the research. Particular space is given to feminist enquiry, which has historically utilised biographical approaches in drawing ‘women out of obscurity’ and ‘repairing the historical record’ (Reinharz, cited in Merrill, p.17). In Merrill’s enquiry into the benefits of biographical enquiry, for example, the feminist approach ‘of working with women and not on women’, sits in contradistinction to ‘traditional’ research, providing a paradigm of a more egalitarian approach (Oakley, cited in Merrill, p.17). In the biographical, or ‘qualitative space’ the researchers featured here are able to discover something more penetrating than quantitative data; ‘a deeper knowledge from the inside, in order to develop critical research with rather than about these subjects’ (p.44).

The self-reflexive adult educationalist will likely find comfort in the refreshing honesty of Part 2 of this volume, on ‘the auto/ethnographic imagination’, wherein essays reflect on the often-awkward positionality of the researcher, who is variously interloper, eavesdropper, and creative interpreter. In both essays, a creative struggle is perceived in the quest for a more appropriate and

flexible form and practice through which to tell the story/stories at hand. In Pastuhov and Sivenius' piece, the researcher sits often awkwardly in the corner, an insider/outsider in their audited English study circle. While the researcher has enthusiastically thrown themselves into the 'field' with a view to assimilating and absorbing the lived experiences therein, the attempt to engage with the class is not always met with the desired response, prompting the researcher to ask: 'Could I have done something differently?' (p.67). As these essays testify, however, the flexibility of the form can often lead to refreshing and penetrating analysis.

There is also much in this volume for those with an interest in embodied research and pedagogies – particularly those which draw on visual art, poetry, sound and movement. Essays by Butterwick and Roy, as well as Meaney, and Clover in Parts 3 and 4 explore what is missing from traditional discourses as well as public spaces, such as the widely trusted educational space of the museum. Articles in Part 6 meditate further on arts-based methods, celebrating their capacity to 'restory' (p.167) and bring about a fresh understanding for both researchers and participants. An article by Langdon et al. powerfully reaffirms the significance of song as a pedagogical practice and creative form of resistance in Ada, Ghana. Meanwhile, Ann Hegarty's adoption of the 'photovoice' method provides space for a group of stay at home fathers in Dublin to reflect on their position within the family and as a collective. Part 7 of the collection also investigates different ways of knowing and orienting one's self in research through and on movement.

While qualitative methods shine throughout the volume for their ability to communicate complex stories, quantitative methods are by no means disregarded. Essays on mixed methods research show us how it is possible to have an objective approach that is alive to culture and history; which 'embraces the subjectivity of the individuals being studied, and doesn't hide the values of the researcher' (Cortina, cited in Taylor and Milosh Raykov, p.127). However, there is a healthy dose of cynicism around the current trend toward quantification – particularly in O'Keefe's article, which considers adult skills assessment online through systems such as PIAAC. Yet O'Keefe proposes that new ethnographic methods such as 'trace ethnography' are able to 'move the conversation about educational attainment towards how and why data are produced' (p.161), once again allowing for deeper critical reflection.

Reflecting outward, the final chapter/section considers creative and critical approaches to research dissemination through an analysis of the *Transforming*

Lives project in the UK. Duckworth and Smith consider the democratising and transformative potential of using digital platforms to share lived experiences in Further Education, against the grain of neoliberal policy making and marketising forces within FE, which privilege a narrow skills agenda.

Reading this collection within the context of an ongoing global pandemic, these accounts of meaningful grassroots research sing out with a new urgency. Published prior to the onset of COVID-19, the volume nonetheless elucidates some of the structural inequalities pre-existing the crisis and the need for a dynamic response. Of course, we are now in no doubt that these inequalities have been compounded by the pandemic, with a significant detrimental impact on the ability of marginalised groups to participate fully in learning. Hearing these peripheral and systematically silenced voices through research during and in the wake of the crisis will be critical; and the creative, probing, and mutually empowering research methods detailed in this volume should be in the arsenal of any researcher who seeks to work alongside communities to tell a story worth hearing.

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Policy Review: A Literacy Practitioner Response to *Future FET – Transforming Learning – The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-24*

REVIEWED BY GWEN REDMOND AND MÁIRÍN KENNY

As literacy practitioners, we welcome a number of aims of the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy. Acknowledgment of, and commitment to, community education is welcomed. Often literacy education and community education are seen as separate spheres, however the ethos of literacy education is also one grounded in Freirean principles of education, with dialogue at the centre and wider outcomes involving liberation and transformation. Welcome too are references to EU Key Competences of Lifelong Learning (EU, 2019), these also resonate with literacy practitioners who know that literacy education is more than skills acquisition but also facilitates the development of competences to fully participate in all aspects of life.

Cognisant of *'what is counted becomes what counts'* (Merrifield, 1999), we are heartened to see indications that distance travelled models to measurement are being explored. This will acknowledge the often described intangible outcomes of literacy education. Embedding digital literacy is a strong theme which has already been embraced by learners and practitioners. With closures of buildings due to the pandemic, our learners have shown a determination to continue to engage. Their resilience in gaining the skills and equipment they need to learn online is commendable. Once we return to onsite provision, it may be the case that literacy and numeracy education is embedded in digital skills, rather than vice versa. 'Other potential approaches to validation of learning outcomes' (p. 49) besides certification are stated as being explored, this too is welcomed as the suite of available QQI modules, although vast, do not always meet the learning needs of the literacy learner. The Strategy states its commitment to a 'range of tailored provision to include individual, small group and family learning' (p.49). With the continued move away from the volunteer tutor providing one to one, it would be important for the Strategy to indicate how one to one

provision will be provided with the current ratio of learners to tutor required for paid provision. Overall however, the philosophy of ‘transforming learning’ under three pillars of *building skills, fostering inclusion and facilitating pathways* speaks louder to the vocational educational opportunities offered by FET rather than the emancipatory underpinnings of literacy and community education.

Of the unique FET learners quoted in the Strategy, 50% fall under levels 1-2, the remit of literacy practitioners. A further 20% are studying at levels 3-4 of which a large proportion will also fall under the remit of literacy provision. The Strategy further acknowledges that some learners on level 5 and 6 courses will require supports with language, literacy and numeracy and advocates for a move away from standalone provision to a fully integrated model. We know that one in six (PIAAC, 2012) Irish adults have literacy difficulties which are serious enough as to act as a barrier to an individual’s fullest participation, or ‘active inclusion,’ in Irish society. We know too that inequalities are on the rise and that one in four students in DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) primary schools (ERSI, 2015) have literacy difficulties which will impact on their success at second level.

With this in mind, the Strategy’s vision for a fully integrated model of literacy education leaves literacy practitioners perplexed. There is no doubt that adults acquire literacy skills when they are relevant to the learner and have an immediate impact on their lives. To integrate numeracy skills into cookery and carpentry courses, for instance, makes sense whether on a non-formal course or an accredited programme or apprenticeship. This model of integration is one the practitioner advocates and often provides. However, when we reflect on the motivations of individuals who we meet daily in our literacy practice; they talk of improving literacy skills to help their children and grandchildren, to help understand discounts in sales, to put themselves forward on a local community committee, to use social media to connect with family and they sometimes talk about literacy skills to help them in the workplace or to gain work. More often than not however, they talk of literacy skills so that they no longer have to hide, so they can feel better about themselves and utilise this new-found confidence to achieve personal goals and participate more fully in family and community life. The FET strategy suggests a continued move away from stand-alone services. The practitioner understands this to be the Adult Literacy Services, which not only exist as centres, but have tentacles reaching out into parish halls, parents’ rooms, community groups, disability services, addiction recovery services and the workplace. From our perspective, this literacy model is already fully

integrated, into our communities. As Simon Harris stated in his recent address to the 2021 NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency) AGM, '*literacy is not just about skills, but it is about the whole person*' and as practitioners, we would add that it is also about the whole of society. Adult Literacy practitioners will resist a move from stand-alone provision. In practice, they have already embraced integrated delivery across a range of courses provided, but a truly democratic society offers education for education's sake and standalone services enable that. Practitioners argue that although literacy and community education can function as a pathway to further education and employment, for the majority of our learners our programmes are the destination rather than the journey.

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Policy Review: *Future FET: Transforming Learning – The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2022*

REVIEWED BY LUKE MURTAGH

The latest FET strategy was published in July 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Brexit negotiations. It got limited attention on a crowded public policy agenda. While the strategy provides a blueprint for building a strong, effective FET service in Ireland it faces significant implementation challenges.

When preparing the strategy SOLAS took into account the broader public policy context; a review of its first strategy; an impressive consultation process including a National Learner Forum, and recognition that FET is moving from its establishment and development phase.

The strategy is built around pillars and themes. The pillars are building skills, fostering inclusion, and facilitating pathways, while the themes include digital transformation, learner and performance focus, staffing and structures as well as capital development. Defining characteristics of FET are simplified pathways, easier access, quality learner experiences, and a clear identity.

There are clear messages for the sector. FET needs to fundamentally change. Change is emphasised by noting that the world's largest media company Facebook produces no content; Uber, the world's largest taxi company owns no taxis; Netflix, the world's largest movie provider, owns no cinemas and Skype, the world's largest telecoms company owns no infrastructure. Change is also reflected in the fourth industrial revolution.

The learner is at the heart of the strategy by catering for changes in ways of learning, types of learners; knowing about learners and measuring and improving learner outcomes. Critically, the strategy recognizes that 'FET must

be cognisant of the broader purpose of learning, which goes beyond meeting the skills of the economy' (SOLAS, 2021).

Having the learner at the core also means (1) restructuring provision into foundation, bridging and vocational skills categories; (2) establishing the Further Education College of the Future; (3) reforming funding; (4) developing an integrated numeracy and literacy strategy, and a framework for community education; (5) capital development.

The strategy is ambitious. Recognition of community education and the broader purposes of learning is laudable and represents a significant shift from the neo-liberal focus of the first SOLAS strategy. The strategy has exciting recommendations. The most important and achievable is moving from the bewildering range of FET offerings to a simplified structure. Critically, SOLAS will cease tying funding to individual programmes. These proposals will transform the sector; release significant resources for improving the service to learners, and are cost-neutral. The second exciting proposal is the preparation a strategic framework for community education which places it on a solid footing and provides a rationale for future status, funding and staffing.

Weaknesses include an inadequate implementation strategy, overemphasis on higher education (HE) and neglect of the over sixty fives. The inadequate implementation plan, lacking costings with seven implementation structures and purely aspirational targets will struggle in a crowded public policy agenda. This is probably a timing issue related to the recent move of FET from the Department of Education and Skills to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Over emphasis on HE is also driven by the same fact. This emphasis is likely to mean that community education, FET at the foundation and bridging levels and provision for the new Irish and over sixty-fives will get much less attention.

Challenges include the weakness of the implementation strategy; COVID-19 and the impact of Brexit on the public policy agenda and finances. It will be at least 2023 before COVID-19 and Brexit are resolved. I therefore recommend that a detailed and costed implantation plan be prepared by June 2021 with a simplified implementation structure. A second challenge is the risks involved in the FET College of the Future in the context of the over emphasis on HE and the related natural tendency of colleges to seek greater status. The college project is politically attractive and likely to be developed ahead of community

education, and the foundation and bridging categories. A third challenge will be developing measures of softer outcomes for learners. Success in this effort will have an impact on the direction of FET in Ireland into the future.

The strategy is excellent and its weaknesses can be rectified. Successful implementation will demand determination; strategic decision making; coherence and persistence by key stakeholders; a recognition of political realities; a focus on the learner and on what is achievable in the present circumstances. Without a sound, costed implementation strategy by mid-2021, the great potential of *Transforming Learning: The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy*, will not be fully realised.

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Policy Review: *Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy*

REVIEWED BY PETER TIERNAN

SOLAS has recently undertaken a consultation on their Adult Literacy, Numeracy, and Digital Literacy (ALND) Strategy. This 10-year strategy aims to create an environment where all adults in Ireland have the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills to fully take part in society. This response to that strategy will focus on digital literacy and will comment on SOLAS' conceptualisation of digital literacy and what this means for educators in the Adult and Further Education sector.

The strategy recognises digital literacy as an essential skill for 21st century living, enabling individuals to accomplish day-to-day activities, access essential services and information, and maintaining social and family connections using technology. The strategy also acknowledges digital literacy as a core competence for workforce participation and engaging in lifelong learning. In its definition of the core digital competencies, the strategy draws heavily on the European Digital Competence Framework (DigiComp), which is a tool developed to measure (and improve) citizens' digital competence across a range of interrelated areas. The strategy lists these competencies as: Information and data literacy (understanding the meaning behind facts and figures); Communication and collaboration; Media literacy; Digital content creation; Safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity); and Problem solving and critical thinking.

While DigiComp is one of the foremost frameworks in digital literacy, the lack of breadth applied to the competencies in the strategy, and the reliance on one frame of reference for digital competence results in a lack of detail and nuance. In the first instance, the DigiComp framework itself drills down much further into the details of each competency, and while it cannot be expected for an

initial strategy document to cover all of these details, the lack of any expansion leaves room for misunderstanding for those unfamiliar with the area. First, information and data literacy includes much more than understanding the meaning behind facts and figures. In fact, this makes up only one aspect of the competence. This competence also includes the ability to search for data in digital environments, evaluate the credibility and reliability of data, and organise and store data effectively for later retrieval. Second, other digital literacy frameworks exist which provide different perspectives in the field. For example, the JISC (2015) framework, which is widely used and endorsed in education circles, includes aspects such as digital wellbeing. Kurtz and Peled's (2016) seven domains of digital literacy introduces key elements such as social responsibility and the ethical implications/consequences of the use of digital resources.

A key objective of the Strategy is developing foundational digital literacy skills and competencies in those who may have little or no experience or training in the area. It is acknowledged that following attainment of this base level of competence, new pathways for development and progression should be made available to learners. This notion of learner progression is where the greatest opportunity for development exists. It is the educators in the sector that will help students negotiate learning pathways, hence it is vital that the competence of educators in the adult and further education sector is considered. Educators need digital literacy skills and competencies themselves. However, they also have a dual purpose of acting as role models and facilitators of their students' engagement with digital technologies. The European Union has developed the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigiCompEdu) which aims to foster educators' digital competence so that they can seize the potential of digital technologies for enhancing and innovating education. The framework consists of 6 areas: Professional Engagement: Using digital technologies for communication, collaboration and professional development; Digital Resources: Sourcing, creating and sharing digital resources; Teaching and Learning: Managing and orchestrating the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning; Assessment: Using digital technologies and strategies to enhance assessment; Empowering learners: Using digital technologies to enhance inclusion, personalisation and learners' active engagement; and Enabling learners to creatively and responsibly use digital technologies for information, communication, content creation, wellbeing and problem-solving.

As part of the overall 10-year Strategy, it is important that SOLAS engages with educators as well as learners in relation to the development of digital literacy and digital competencies. Educators should be supported in their endeavours, and frameworks such as DigitCompEdu provide the basis for this support, enabling them to view their practice from a number of interconnected areas.

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