

Editorial Comment

ROSEMARY MORELAND, EDITOR

I am delighted to launch our 2019 edition of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* in the year in which our sponsor, AONTAS, celebrates its 50th Anniversary. This is no mean feat in such a fluid and ever-changing environment and it is a testimony to AONTAS' ability to respond to, challenge where appropriate, and withstand those changes. It is these features that have built AONTAS into the successful organisation we see today. As a vibrant, critical and dynamic voice of adult learning across Ireland and beyond, AONTAS continues to forge new relationships across the island of Ireland and with other like-minded organisations across the world, in order to share good practice and support adult learning across the globe. *The Adult Learner* Journal plays its part in helping to disseminate good practice; providing a space for academics and practitioners to critically reflect on theory, policy and practice; and to open channels of dialogue and discussion on the issues pertinent to the broad field of adult learning. This edition therefore focuses on the changes in the field of adult learning, further and community education in Ireland, Europe and across the world over the past 50 years. To mark this significant moment in the history of adult learning in Ireland, the Editorial Board thought it appropriate to invite Liam Bane, former editor and 'founding father' of *The Adult Learner* journal to reflect on the origin and history of the journal. In reading Liam's Guest Foreword, we gain a better sense not only of the journal's humble beginnings, but also of its continuity and ability to endure and remain relevant.

The journal consists of two sections: the first examines perspectives on community and lifelong learning; whilst the second section reviews recent

policies and books of relevance to those in the adult learning field. 'Looking back to look forward' is perhaps a useful phrase to describe this edition of the journal and many of the articles contained within the journal do just that. Thus the first article by Barry Golding and Jack Harvey provides the reader with an in-depth account of the core themes highlighted by the *Adult Learner* and its antecedents over the past 50 years. This 'snapshot in time' article, written from the 'outsider' perspective and commissioned by AONTAS, is an important piece of research which enables the reader not only to gain a better understanding of the history of adult education in Ireland, but specifically provides a useful yardstick to measure the current standing of the journal. The research is of particular benefit to the Editorial Board and AONTAS in order to guide the future direction of the Journal, and we thank the authors for this timely article.

Moreland and Cownie's article adopts a Freirean focus, in its examination of the changes that have taken place in university adult education. Drawing on a current example of university adult education, the authors articulate the need for universities to provide much clearer pathways and routes for adult learners to gain access to further and higher education. Following on with the Freirean theme, McKillican's article succinctly links existentialism with Paulo Freire's pedagogy to argue the importance of resisting the current policy focus on vocational adult learning at the expense of broader adult learning, which can impact positively on the learner's social, political and spiritual well-being and not only his/her economic well-being. He further argues the greater potential for discourse analysis research in adult learning to counter the dominant statutory appetite for statistical-based evidence. Shannon continues the thread of discourse analysis, in her discussion of Irish adult education policy and its relationship to EU policy. Her paper highlights how the language used to define and explain concepts has the power to shape the associated practice field and this can bring opportunities as well as set limitations. Shannon draws on Gramsci's notion of 'counter hegemony' to suggest that within Ireland and the EU, opportunities exist to wage a positional war on the dominant adult education discourse and that discourse analysis can provide the tools to begin deconstructing and uncovering underlying agendas and their ramifications on the myriad of adult learners.

Ring *et al.*, in their evaluation of a continuing professional development programme for early childhood teachers consider issues of lifelong learning and workforce development. They highlight the importance of embedding an understanding of inclusive practice into the training of early childhood teachers

and of creating a clear and recognised structure of continuing professional development for this sector. The final paper of this section, highlights the importance of the learner voice, not only being heard in the right places, but more specifically, contributing to the formation of policy which impacts on them. Reviewing the history of the National Further Education and Training Forum (FET) Learner Forum (NFLF), Dowdall, Sheerin and O'Reilly outline the challenges to developing a robust framework that ensures that the learner voice does not remain a tokenistic tick box exercise, but in fact becomes central to the whole process. Pointing to a wider acceptance of qualitative data, Dowdall *et al.* highlight AONTAS' role in advocating and supporting this position.

Section two of the journal comprises one book and two policy reviews. Dooney's review of the *UK Strategy for Transforming Later Lives* outlines its relevance to the lifelong learning agenda and in particular, the positive impact which adult and community education can have on health and well-being, particularly in later life. Griffin's review of *Digital Transformation: Assessing the Impact of Digitalisation on Ireland's Workforce*, draws attention to the need for employers, educators and trainers to work together to ensure that the workforce is provided with adequate opportunity and access to continuing skills development, and training for new jobs, in order to meet the demands of industry and ensure that they can adapt to new working environments. This brings to the foreground the need for 'learning how to learn', identified so many years ago by proponents of lifelong learning. We conclude this edition of the journal with Bairbre Fleming's review of Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan's (2017) *Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education*. Fleming's review highlights the usefulness of this book for anyone involved in access research, practice or policy.

Liam Bane begins his Guest Foreword in the year 1984, with a reference to George Orwell's work of the same name. The articles presented in this edition do in fact have Orwellian resonances, since many of the issues and concerns voiced over the past 50 years, with regard to modern society and the need for adult learning ring all too true. In a rapidly changing society, it is important to pause at key milestones and evaluate how far we have come, what we have achieved, what are the important goals to focus on and formulate a strategy to achieve these. I hope that the articles in this year's journal provide us, individually and collectively, whether practitioners, policy-makers, researchers or academics with some tools to reflect on our own journey with adult learning and 'make the road by walking' (Horton and Freire, 1990).

My thanks to all our contributors, the Editorial Board, AONTAS staff and funders SOLAS. Without your support, hard work and commitment this journal could not be published.

References

Horton, M. and Freire, P. 1990. *We make the road by walking*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Guest Foreword

LIAM BANE, FORMER EDITOR

1984. Not perhaps the apocalyptic year as envisaged by Mr. Orwell but the year in which I put the proposition to an AGM of the Association of Adult Education Organisers that we should support the publication of an adult education journal which would appear annually. Neither could this be described as an apocalyptic event but it did receive the backing of the Association. The journal arrived one year later and the launch was a rather low key and ‘in house’ affair.

It is necessary to provide some context here. 1980 saw the appointment of 50 Adult Education Organisers (AEOs) (or Officers as they were later called) and two Arts Organisers. It was the first signal that the state had decided to recognise the necessity to provide education facilities for adults throughout the country. Unfortunately, however, the appointments coincided with a serious downturn in the economy and the resultant policies of financial stringency meant that there were Organisers who had ambitious plans but did not receive the funding to implement them. So badly serviced were the Organisers that some had difficulties in finding suitable offices and, of course, secretarial support was out of the question. So difficult, in fact, that one colleague had to work from home for some weeks – working from home is a situation that is now commonplace but this certainly was not the case back then!

Despite the obstacles, gradually basic needs such as adult literacy were identified as AEOs struggled to put adult literacy provision on a more secure footing than the entirely voluntary provision which then was the norm. Another significant awakening came with the recognition that adult learning does not have to be confined to evening classes and that adults are capable of learning in the light of day! Groups with exotic names like KLEAR, TACT, DATE and RAVE, again voluntary and almost all female, suddenly sprung up and, with the cooperation

of Adult Education Officers (AEOs) and Vocational Education Committees (VECs), offered a wide range of subjects. These classes were held in the mornings and some centres even succeeded in making crèche facilities available, again thanks to the generosity of the volunteers. Similarly, given the difficulties facing those looking for suitable employment at this time or those who had been made redundant, there were various attempts to provide education programmes which led eventually to the establishment of VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme) which was sponsored by the Department of Education and saw the first influx of adequate funding in the Adult Education sector.

Into this era of uncertainty, *The Adult Learner* Journal was born and looking at it now, it definitely was a creature of its time with a kind of 'impoverished please help me' appearance about it. In fact, anyone out there who possesses a copy of this first undated edition, do not part with it because it definitely belongs to the rarest of Rare Books category. The Journal was financed by the members of the Association and other interested parties who paid five punts each. To my knowledge, there was no equivalent journal in existence at this time and the early editions certainly were aimed at practitioners and adult learners. The first Editorial Board consisted of five AEOs – Kathleen Forde, John Kennedy, Michael Riordan, the late Tony Downes and myself. Of the five, three were still in situ up to 2003 while the remaining places were filled by various others including Ted Fleming, who represented academia, and whose advice and contributions were invaluable.

From the beginning, the primary motivation was the need to raise the profile of Adult Education generally and to showcase the projects, programmes and initiatives which AEOs had started or were involved in, working with part-time teachers, voluntary groups and other relevant agencies, the hope was that the journal would provide a platform for AEOs, part time teachers, practitioners and learners to tell their stories and present as many points of view as possible in those early exploratory days. However, eliciting articles from adult learners was not easy and those who had interesting stories to tell lacked the confidence to put them in print. A good example is a mother who had severe literacy difficulties and had finally looked for help and worked her way up to sitting the Leaving Cert English exam in which she was successful. She agreed to commit to an interview using pseudonyms and while it was interesting, it was not at all as powerful or as moving as listening to her relating her personal story directly. And indeed neither was it easy to elicit articles from my colleagues, who could talk a good story but who also were shy about the venture into the world of print.

1991 was a year that brought significant change when Tom Inglis, then Director of AONTAS, kindly agreed that the funding for *The Adult Learner* would be provided by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation. What a relief this proved to be for an embattled Editor, who year after year, sought out a printing company, generally consisting of one or two members, who would undertake the publication of the journal for the meagre funds on offer. Over the first six years, we had perhaps three or four different publishers and summer holidays provided the opportunity for contacting printers with offices in a lane in mid-city Dublin or remote Kiltiernan. There were frequent visits, frantic revisions, urgent phone calls, and usually the last minute arrival of the article which you had commissioned and had decided was not forthcoming. Yes, you get what you pay for and the first and most notable difference in what I referred to as *The Adult Learner* mark two, was the front cover and the much improved presentation generally. Previously, the Journal had as subtitle 'Journal of the Adult Education Association'. The new model was titled *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* which was an invitation to expand on what had been a rather confined space. This new approach was evidenced in the composition of the Editorial Board which now included Tom Inglis himself and a member of the AONTAS executive as well as representatives from Ulster University and the Women's Education Project in Belfast. Shortly afterwards, Tom moved on to his beloved sociology at University College Dublin (UCD) and was replaced as AONTAS Chief Executive Officer (CEO) by Berni Brady. Berni, a good friend and a staunch supporter, brought the same enthusiasm and sense of style to *The Adult Learner* as she did to all other aspects of her work.

The new expansive approach was also clearly evident in the contents of the renovated Journal. For the first time, we had articles from our neighbours in the North of Ireland, a fine piece from Kathleen Lynch, co-ordinator of the Equality Studies Centre at University College Dublin and an article from Gearoid O Tuathaigh, professor of Modern History at University College Galway. We did, however, still attempt to remain in touch with our friends and subscribers with articles from local community activists. The Book Reviews section also reflected the new approach showing an increase in the number of books reviewed and also books with a more academic approach.

I said my farewells to editorship in 2003 when I shared the job with Eileen Curtis, then AEO with Kilkenny VEC. Eileen, who had served her time on the Editorial Board, had a sharp analytical mind, and I had no doubt that she would

continue to move the Journal in a different direction. And move it on she did. For instance, in the 2008 edition, Eileen, in her Editorial Comment stated

Those of us who work in the field are only too well aware of the life changing experience which involvement in adult education can bring to people's lives and in order to give credibility to our work it is essential that a practice which can be so powerful is grounded in a strong philosophical and theoretical basis. This would strengthen and lend credibility to a field of experience which we have all struggled to build up for so long.

No argument with that and the Editorial Board included Berni Brady and five academics. The contents had two sections – Refereed Articles and Practice Articles. This was new ground for sure but I do note the year - 2008 was the year that heralded the arrival of the Great Crash and brought once again bad news for adult education providers and saw a return to where we came from in 1985 as funding in the sector was slashed and jobs which we thought were permanent were lost and the Adult Education Officer was proving difficult to find. Ironic – yes, and sad! But AONTAS did succeed in keeping the Journal alive.

In a parting article from myself which appeared in the 2003 edition of *The Adult Learner*, I note a neat quote in T.S. Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*;

Last season's fruit is eaten

And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.

For last year's words belong to last year's language

And next year's words await another voice.

Editorial Board

Rosemary Moreland, Ulster University, *Editor*

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Contributors

LIAM BANE was Adult Education Officer with Co. Dublin Vocational Education Committee from 1980 until 2004 when he retired. In 1984 he founded The Adult Learner and was the editor of the journal until 2003. He remains a devoted adult learner.

BARRY GOLDING, JACK HARVEY are academics from Federation University in Australia. Barry Golding is an Adjunct Professor in Adult Education at Federation University Australia with extensive international research experience in community-based and older men's learning, including through community-based Men's Sheds across Ireland. Dr. Jack Harvey is a statistician from Federation University who has collaborated in Barry's research for over 15 years.

ROSEMARY MORELAND, ERIK COWNIE are Lecturers in Community Development at Ulster University, delivering a part-time professionally accredited BSc Hons Community Development and Community Outreach programme. Their research interests include community and informal learning; widening access and participation.

ALEX MCKILLICAN is a teacher and adult educator with Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB). He has worked in this area since 2007. He is interested in how education can impact the lives of adult learners in a metaphysical way.

DENISE SHANNON has worked in Léargas (the National Agency for the implementation of Erasmus+ in Ireland) since 2003 and has particular interest in how adult education can address social and educational inequality. She recently completed a Masters in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. Her thesis undertook a Critical Discourse Analysis of EU policy discourses and language in the White Paper and the FET Strategy.

EMER RING, LISHA O'SULLIVAN, SUZANNE O'KEEFE, FIONA FERRIS, EUGENE WALL were all involved in the evaluation of the programme of continuing professional development, which is described in the article Transforming the Lives of Early Childhood Teachers, Autistic Children and their Families. The authors' research interests include early years' education; inclusion; adult education; continuing professional development and educational psychology.

LEAH DOWDALL, NIAMH O'REILLY, EDEL SHEERIN work at AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation. Each are directly involved in the development and delivery of the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum. Between them they have experience in educational research, adult education, and health promotion.

BRIAN DOONEY works as the Training and Development Facilitator with Age and Opportunity, the national organisation that inspires older people to be more active, more visible, more creative, more connected, more often. Previously he worked as a lecturer in English and Adult Education in All Hallows College, Dublin City University (2004–2016).

KATHERINE GRIFFIN works with the secretariat to the Expert Group of Skills Needs, which is based in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. Her work includes research centred on skills and labour market accessibility for cohorts with low participation rates.

BAIRBRE FLEMING is Deputy Director of UCD Access and Life Long Learning. She has extensive experience working with underrepresented students through the UCD Access programmes with particular emphasis on mature students and part-time programmes. Her PhD drew on a sociological analysis of the experiences of mature students in higher education.