



The Voice of
Adult Learning

AONTAS Community Education Network Conversations Series: Session Two

*'We make the path by walking:
community education walking
dialogues'*

Facilitated by Susan Cullinane (KWETB)
and Jerry O'Neill (Maynooth University)

Date: 5th November 2020



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Introduction

On Thursday 5th November 2020, in the midst of another lockdown, a group of adult and community educators gathered online for a second in a series of CEN conversations organised by Suzanne Kyle from AONTAS and with the technical support of Barry Dolan. The session, which was facilitated by Susan Cullinane (KWETB) and Jerry O’Neill (Maynooth University), started and ended online but was centred around a ‘dialogue walk’ in which participants paired up, went outside, walked and talked for half an hour or so around their locale on a couple of questions. As promised on the day, we (Susan and Jerry) have put this short document together which reflects on and, hopefully, illuminates some of the process and possibilities of the workshop.

Challenges for community educators working in the pandemic

Soon after Suzanne invited us to lead the session, we met up (online, of course) to talk through the possibilities of what we might do – and how we might do it. What emerged from this initial conversation with Suzanne was the sense of how difficult work and life has become for many educators and organisers during the pandemic. Naturally, and rightly so, a lot of the focus and energy of our work as educators has been in attending to the needs of the learners and groups that we work with – many of whom, of course, have been hit very hard in the pandemic (AONTAS, 2020).

But in attending to the needs of those around us, we can, all too easily neglect ourselves. Of course, attending to our own care as educators is essential if we are committed to sustaining and developing the often challenging work of community education (Palmer, 2007). Often there doesn’t seem to be enough time to slow ourselves down enough to reflect and yet making decisions in a rush may not lead to the best outcomes. In addition, slowing down is countercultural, an oddity in the paradigm of incessant growth which is unsustainable (Mountz, et al., 2015).

We were also conscious of the ubiquity of meetings that were now happening online. The high-tech communicative working worlds that we find ourselves in seem, somehow, at odds with the low-tech, embodied realities that many of us are used to in community and adult education. Maybe we have managed that transition well-enough, but like, Strassler writing

in the New York Times recently, we wonder what we have lost in that rush to Zoom (Strassler, 2020)?

We reminded ourselves that we are experienced educators with experience and tools. What we are trying to do is to adapt the pedagogy of community education to online provision. We, like everyone else, are adapting, we will make mistakes. We tell our learners to learn from mistakes, can we take the same approach with ourselves?

There is much talk of 'going back to normal', but how realistic is that? We can't fall into the same river twice; the river has moved on. Perhaps in the future there will be some blend of in person and online community education so that we learn to live with Covid. How can we as Leo Casey suggested in the previous meeting, reflect into the future (Casey, 2020)?

In addition, there may be some benefits in online provision, in terms of travel, learners with disabilities, those with anxieties in terms of Covid, being in groups etc.

As we talked this through and what we might do, we drew, as is natural, on what we have been doing recently.

Walking as an adult education process

And one thing that we have been experimenting with in our practice has been drawing on the possibilities of walking as a practice of self-care, reflection and inquiry. Walking, for both of us, is an important space to both let go of stuff and work things through.

As well as using walking as an informal and natural personal space for self-care and reflection, we have also used it in our work more purposefully as a learning activity, for programme evaluation, and as a research method (O'Neill, M. & Roberts, 2020; O'Neill J. , 2020).

Of course, lots of us will have facilitated or being part of social and political walking tours as well in larger groups. Indeed, as was clear from the workshop, a lot of practitioners use walking in lots of different ways in their work and personal lives. In that sense, we were not doing anything new in our session other than stating the pedagogical obvious - or, maybe it's more accurate to say that we were trying to draw attention to the possibilities of the one of the most common human activities.

The great thing about walking is that it gets us out there ... away from screens and devices. Most often we like to walk on our own. For us, as we suspect for many participants, this solo walking is an important part of our self-care.

But walking side-by side with someone can sometimes be a powerful way to talk through the tricky things in life, learning and work. Humans have been walking together for millennia and in doing so we become attuned to each other (Magann, O'Mara, & Murtagh, 2020). In many ways this dialogic walking is very congruent with an adult education approach. Walking with a learner through their locale, their space, can be a useful way to negate some of the tensions and power imbalances of more formal learning environments.

Maybe, then, walking with a learner through their landscapes allows them, very naturally, as Freire might put it, to name their world as we move through it with them (Freire, 1996). It also allows us, as adult educators, to ask, as we walk, the probing questions that might open up the possibilities for both walking partners to start to re-imagine that landscape in different ways. Such a process can shift the power balances between educators and participants, as we learn together in the walking and talking.

There is something too, in walking, that promotes a kind of slowing down that we have been talking about together for a few years now, and mentioned above, that seems increasingly crucial if we want to maintain the quality and sustainability of our work as adult and community educators. But such a move towards deliberately slow processes feels almost like a political act of resistance in institutions and work cultures that valorise productivity (Mountz, et al., 2015; O'Neill & Cullinane, 2017).

Towards a plan

And so, with that sense that we wanted to focus on what is going on for educators and a desire to get people away from screens, Teams and Zoom for a bit, we started to craft a plan.

In some ways it sounds simple: we wanted to meet online; pair up; go for a walk; re-gather online; and reflect on the process.

But, as soon as we started to pick away at this we knew there would be logistical complications: how would people share phone numbers? What if people ran out of credit or battery? What about people who have limited mobility or couldn't walk outside at all? Would people be happy to share their phone number with someone they didn't know?

We didn't, or couldn't, be sure about answers to any of these. Instead, we resolved to be as clear as we could in our communication in advance of the session about what we would be asking people to do if they signed up or turned up.

We decided to adopt a walking activity known as 'Dialogue Walks'. Jerry was familiar with this process from his own practice which, in turn, he had adapted from the work of *Collective Leadership of Scotland* – a collaborative network of community and public sector leaders focused on systemic transformation (Collective Leadership for Scotland, 2020).

The main thing about a Dialogue Walk is that each person takes it in turn to talk uninterrupted (for about 15 mins usually) into a set question(s). After 15 mins, the roles reverse, and the other person takes it in turn to talk.

The challenge in such an activity can be in the listening. But we feel that there is something important in allowing the silences to go unfilled, to allow sentences to trail off ... This 'deep listening' as Collective Leadership Scotland calls it allows the possibility of moving to listening with an 'open will' which can connect to 'an emerging future' (Collective Leadership for Scotland, 2020).

One thing that we thought and talked carefully about was the question(s) that we would send folk off with on their walking dialogues. We were keen that people could communicate a sense of the places they were walking through. But we also wanted people to check-in with each other – or rather themselves. And finally, we felt that it was important in such a reflexive exercise that people could (self) interrogate the ‘why’ around their work.

We felt that a ‘why’ question might open up the telling of occupational stories and biographies with invocations of our pasts, presents and futures - but that would also, quite possibly, draw in values – why the work is important. Reflecting on our personal stories and values is a key part of the reflexive lens which Brookfield identifies in his idea of the critically reflective practitioner (2017) but that weaving of the personal into practice and the bigger picture is also part of the modes of being a critical educator (hooks, 1994) and, indeed, the process of transformative education itself (Mezirow, 2000).

We also wanted to pose questions that would be easy to remember on a walk - so we settled on three questions starting with ‘where’, ‘how’ and ‘why’. ‘Where am I?’; ‘How am I?’ and ‘Why do I do the work that I do?’

After some back and forth, and with the help of Suzanne Kyle and Barry Dolan from AONTAS, we developed a plan for the session which we have shared below in case anyone would like to adopt it. It is important to note that having someone like Barry present to deal with the technical aspects of an online session – but also, to have a sense of adult education processes – is really important in making things go as smoothly as possible.

The plan

Gathering	Music playing as folk sign in [Ayub Ogada]	20 mins
AONTAS intro Big group Music playing	Suzanne intro and AONTAS announcements ... Introduce by name and where you are <u>on chat</u> as we gather ...	1100 –1120
Settling Susan and Jerry intro Big group	An opening grounding activity: Five breaths ... (Susan) ... How can we bring community education online ... experimental ... ‘reflecting into the future (Leo Casey)’? ... slowing down ... (Susan) ... Walking as an adult education practice (Jerry) ... Guidance for small group activity (Jerry)	15 mins 1120 - 1135
Pairing-up	Gather in fours in zoom ...	10 mins

Groups of four	<p><u>Text to share in groups:</u></p> <p>‘Introduce yourselves by name. Use a weather description to tell the others how you are this morning. Pair up for walks. Exchange phone numbers for walking dialogue. Try to avoid pairing up with someone you know.’</p> <p>Barry to send prompt to exchange numbers with three minutes to go</p>	1135 – 1145
<p>Setting-up walking dialogue</p> <p>Big group</p>	<p>Jerry set up the walking dialogue</p> <p>Set the question and process [Importance of listener/ing] [<i>See Collective Leadership of Scotland resource – 4 Levels of Listening</i>]</p> <p>Walking Dialogue Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each person speaks uninterrupted for 15 minutes ... sharing only what you are comfortable to share ... • Into and around three simple questions ... Where am I? How am I? Why am I doing the work that I do now? • Listener ... be comfortable with silences • Talk for 15 – listener keep an eye on the time • Minute of silent contemplation after the 15 • The second person talks for 15 – retrace route • At the end of second talk, another moment of silence – reconnecting to the outer world • Use remaining time to talk together about the experience ... anything emerging you might like to share (or not) <p>Leave time for questions on process ...</p> <p>Off you go!</p>	15 mins 1145– 1200
Walking dialogues	... The walking bit ...	40 mins

Paired walking	Susan/Jerry remain in big group Zoom space for anyone who comes back in early or can't engage in dialogue.	1200 - 1240
Reconnecting, re-gathering, reflecting Big group Music playing	Getting back online ... make a cup of tea ... Ask people to journal as everyone gathers (4/5 mins) (Jerry) Reflections on process ... Invite voices to share or use chat	20 mins 1235 – 1255
Close Big group	Closing ritual ... everyone unmutes ... and speaks into the space together about the next step they will take after the workshop ... (Susan) ... end ... goodbye!	12.55 - 13.00 The End :)

Reflections and emergence.

As people returned, we guided everyone to take a few minutes to switch off their cameras and write for a few minutes in an open and unstructured way about the experience.

We had time then to hear the thoughts of participants.

The general sense was that it was a positive experience. Like ourselves, some expressed a regret, or a 'counter-intuitive' tension, that they still couldn't get away from their phones ... that their devices, and as such, work, was now following them into the sacred personal spaces of walking. We certainly get that.

But for others it was simply 'lovely to go out' ... or a 'joy' to connect with a 'real' human, 'in the flesh', after what felt like a long time. There was mention of it almost being a 'decadent' thing to do which made us think about work cultures and practices that don't value such spaces for purposeful slowness and reflexivity.

This was reflected in the number of people who signed up for the workshop but the lower number who were there on the day. This may indicate the desire for such spaces but the competing demands on time and how we are conditioned to make our choices? We wondered to ourselves afterwards that in many workplaces we only exist if we are somehow 'active' online – seen to be busy. And again, it makes us think of slow and reflective work practices as being political and even radical in some organisations. This seems to come up for us across all the spaces we have been collaborating on with practitioners over the last few years.

There was also mention of 'a sense of unease in facing challenges' which was interesting to hear and we would have liked to have more time to stay with, and unearth, this. But, maybe this sense of unease, the awkwardness of our own silences, is something like the

moments of disorientation that can be part of the process of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) – of course, we are not claiming that this moment of ‘unease’ was transformative for the participant but maybe such a process holds the potential to bring us into that zone where such learning can occur if we follow that thread of unease ... or maybe not. As we say, there was more to unearth in that if we had the time.

And finally, there was something, we feel in connections made in the process. The word and idea of ‘connection’ came up a few times as people reflected on the walks ... that sense of people, as they presented glimpses of their stories, having interconnecting stories and that the process allowed a kind of dialogic weaving to begin – working collectively to make some sense of our working lives and values as adult educators.

Final words

One thing that is hard to judge on Zoom is how a session with a group has gone. We felt that it went ok and hoped that people accepted it for the moment of experimentation of practice that it was. We have no doubt that all those present would be able to adapt and improve on the process in their own spaces. We’d love to hear if anyone plays around with it.

Contact details

Please find our email addresses below if you’d like to get in contact with us about any aspect of the session:

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