The Adult Learner

THE ADULT LEARNER
2021

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Section Two – Book and Policy Reviews

Editorial Comment

ROSEMARY MORELAND, EDITOR

Last year we announced our call for papers focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on adult, community and further education. Our main purpose was to provide space to reflect on the lived experiences of adult learners and educators alike, grappling with a worldwide crisis, where daily routines of school, work, shopping and visiting friends and family were suddenly snatched away. In the midst of this turmoil and dystopian reality, adult learning in all its many forms and facets sought to negotiate pathways through the pandemic. Adult learning, in addition to bestowing knowledge, skills and qualifications, more importantly offers social and emotional support to many adults. The papers included in this current edition are a testimony to the wider benefits of adult learning, as well as documenting the particular challenges faced by learners and educators living through a global pandemic.

The journal consists in two parts: Part One comprises eight articles whilst Part Two comprises two Book and three Policy Reviews. We open with the voice of an adult learner Karen O'Donovan, who clearly articulates her own experience as an adult learner living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Karen's experiences reflect both the challenges which many adult learners have experienced, in moving to online learning, as well as the unanticipated benefits. These sentiments are echoed throughout many of the papers in this edition; but equally these papers, written predominantly by adult educators, also provide insights into how these challenges impacted on them and highlight the creativity and experimental nature of adult education. Hawthorne-Steele et al.'s article focuses on repurposing a face-to-face community education programme to online learning, whilst ensuring that Freirean principles of dialogue and transformational learning are at the core of the learning process. The authors conclude that the shared tutor/learner experience of negotiating

the online learning platform reinforces a Freirean pedagogy, where tutor and learner are on a journey together.

Cullinane et al.'s paper echoes this finding, outlining the importance of supporting tutors, who could then provide support for the learners. As with the previous article, the authors highlight how the creation of strong tutor-learner as well as peer-learner relationships are as crucial to the success of online adult learning, as indeed they are to face-to-face learning. They argue that a participatory pedagogy builds resilience in both learner and tutor. Kenny et al.'s paper, in taking a case-study approach, offers further suggestions for good practice, in moving from blended to fully online delivery. Their study highlights the difficulties facing both learners and educators, who had to juggle competing priorities of home and work life, often within the same physical space. Arnold et al.'s article provides a Canadian perspective on responses to adult teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although already delivered in a fully online capacity, the authors contend that the emergent health crisis warranted revisiting their programme, to take cognisance of the environment which learners found themselves in. Interestingly, the students on this programme are also adult educators and the course team thus acknowledged the administrative and governance difficulties they faced as educators within a university setting, whilst recognising the challenges facing their students, as learners as well as adult educators in a wide variety of settings across the country. Using narrative reflection, the authors highlight the importance of engendering learner and educator agency, in the face of often overwhelming feelings of powerlessness.

The relevance of learner agency and identity are core themes of Parkinson et al.'s paper, which draws attention to inequalities in societies, brought much more starkly to the foreground by the current pandemic. They argue that the forced closure of educational institutions has created a critical juncture, which exposes the limitations of a system still largely based on knowledge transmission and acquisition. This, the authors contend, is despite the field of adult and community education's longstanding critique of the limitations of the traditional education model and a substantive body of literature pointing to the need for learners in 21st Century to gain competence in learning 'how to learn'. Their article proposes learner agency and identity as empowering concepts, which give value and voice to the adult learner, in all their myriad of experiences and circumstances. Similarly, Maher and Farrell's article outlines the struggle to encourage women into the political sphere, through a women's political education programme, which seeks to give voice and agency to women

in society. Their case-study, describing their move to online learning during COVID-19, echoes several key findings of other papers in this journal, namely that the online version of the programme recruited participants who would previously not have been able to commit, either due to geographical limitations or personal barriers, e.g. caring responsibilities; and that despite the difficulties posed by the limitations of the technology, bonds between learners and between learners and tutors were formed.

A common thread running through many of the articles is the extent to which learners from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Whilst the neo-liberal rhetoric strives to create a consensus 'war-time' approach to tackling the pandemic, the starkly exposed differentials between the global North and South, as well as a more localised view of privileged versus disadvantaged communities are clear evidence that we are NOT 'all in this together"! In our final article, Speirs draws attention to the way in which the pandemic has amplified the struggles of working-class adult learners. Focusing largely on the barriers facing working-class adults accessing and navigating Higher Education, this article acknowledges the specific obstacles faced by predominantly female single parents.

Part Two of the journal contains two book reviews and three Policy Reviews. Casey's review of Bruce's *Education's Ecosystems: Learning through Life* highlights the notion of a learning ecosystem for understanding the diverse nature and setting for adult learning. Cobain's review of Grummel and Finnegan's (Eds.) book on research in adult education highlights the rich and diverse methodologies chosen by the editor's, to further explore adult education in its many forms. Cobain highly commends this book for its consideration of research methods and practices that promote a spirit of collaboration, participation, self-reflection and the attention paid to diverse forms of data, including poetry and visual arts. We present two reviews on the FET Strategy, *Transforming Learning*; the first by Redmond and Kenny welcomes the Strategy's recognition of community education and the exploration of more nuanced literacy measures. From a literacy practitioner perspective however, they question the wisdom of moving to a fully integrated model of literacy education. The second review by Luke Murtagh is more welcoming of this but warns for the need of a robustly costed implementation plan to ensure that the ambitious vision outlined in this strategy can be made a reality.

Tiernan's review of the Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, focuses on digital skills, highlighting one of its main limitations as adopting a very narrow focus of the DigiComp framework. He warns that this could result in a misunderstanding for those not familiar with the subject area. He argues the need for educators to receive further training in digital skills, in line with the EU Digital Competences for Educators framework, which would ensure that adult educators have the knowledge and skills required to progress their learners.

After reading this selection of reflections on adult learning in the midst of a pandemic, the key message I take is that lifelong learning is as natural and as necessary as breathing. Whilst we must continue to strive for equality and social justice, particularly with regard to adult learning and education, as lifelong learners, we must be ready to adapt, change and forge the next chapter of adult and community education, so that locally and globally, we really do 'build back better'!

Editorial Board Members

Contributor List

KAREN O'DONOVAN is from Clonakilty in West Cork. Karen did a course in CETB beginning in September 2020 called Level 4 'Skills for Work', which incorporated the basics of Information Technology. She enrolled in this course to upskill and become more confident in her use of computers and technology. Karen thoroughly enjoyed the course in spite of the difficult changes that the group had to face when learning remotely. Karen and her classmates set up a WhatsApp group to keep in touch during the course and still communicate with each other; an added bonus to have made some great friends for life!

ISOBEL HAWTHORNE-STEELE is Director of Research with Ulster University Community Development and Senior Lecturer. Isy draws on her experience of professional practice in Community and Youth Work and as Senior Lecturer in Higher Education spanning over forty years. Her research and practice interests are firmly rooted in transformative praxis that leads to social action. ROSEMARY MORELAND is Subject Lead of the Community Development Unit, Programme Co-ordinator of the Post-Graduate Dip. Social Work and Community Development Approaches and Senior lecturer at Ulster and draws on her experience and expertise in adult education for over 30 years. Her research and practice interests are grounded in working with and for non-traditional learners and creating access pathways into Higher Education. ERIK COWNIE is Course Director of the BSc Hons Community Development and lectures on a number of courses at Ulster. Drawing on his extensive community-based practice, he has championed research into educational disadvantage in areas of socio-economic deprivation and adult/community-based learning. Prior to his appointment at Ulster, Erik was a Research Consultant in the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast.

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MICHELLE MAHER co-ordinates the See Her Elected programme. See Her Elected (SHE) is a collaboration between Longford Women's Link and the 50/50 North West Group; it aims to empower women in the rural constituencies of the Midlands and North West to get to know more about politics and to get involved in electoral politics. Michelle's early career was in financial services – a degree in politics and history at Maynooth University was followed by a PhD and lecturing on the University's politics degree. She joined See Her Elected in 2020. TARA FARRELL is the Chief Executive Officer of Longford Women's Link and former Chairperson of AONTAS. She holds an LLM in International Human Rights Law and is also a lecturer in Equality and Human Rights at St. Angela's NUI Galway.

NEIL M SPEIRS is Widening Participation Manager at The University of Edinburgh. His role involves working as a manager, practitioner and researcher in a number of areas concerning widening participation and access, and related policy. His community-based projects along with his teaching and research are centred around a number of areas of interest that span from primary education through secondary, further and higher education. A few of these areas of interest and specialisms are: the transition from primary to secondary education, the sociology of sport, undergraduate student transitions, the equity of student experience, social reproduction and critical pedagogy, the working class mature student, student parents, the hidden curriculum, classism on campus, peer-related pedagogies and autoethnography.

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MÁIRÍN KENNY is an Adult Education Officer working for City of Dublin ETB. She has previously worked as an Adult Literacy Organiser with CDETB, and as a European Project Manager with Ballymun Job Centre. She holds an M.A. in Adult and Community Education. GWEN REDMOND is an Acting Adult Education Officer with CDETB. She has been involved with literacy education since 2004, and is a board member of NALA. Gwen has an M.Ed. in Adult and Community Education from Maynooth University.

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SECTION ONE

Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning

My Story of Learning During COVID-19

KAREN O'DONOVAN

Hi!

My name is Karen and the course that I am doing is called 'Skills for Work'. It is a level four course, and I am doing it through my local Education and Training Centre in Clonakilty since September 2020. It concludes in May 2021. When I started the course, it took place in the centre every Tuesday evening. The class size was greatly reduced because of COVID-19 restrictions and as the situation worsened the centre had to close and the course had to be continued online.

Previously, I would have done other courses in the centre, but this was the first time in my life that I had engaged in online learning. I always felt too intimidated and fearful when it came to anything related to I.T. as it was like the complete 'unknown' to me! The Guidance Counsellor in the centre often suggested online learning as an option, but I never felt confident enough to participate in it because I lacked basic computer knowledge, therefore I decided to do this course to become more computer literate, upskill in the area of I.T., enhance my career prospects and meet new people. The experience has given me an opportunity to achieve all of those things and more. Now I'm familiar with word processing and am able to create and print a range of documents including letters and memos to a mail-able standard in addition to file management on my computer which is like a 'virtual declutter'! I've yet to perfect the typing!

Since the closure of centres, the transition to online learning hasn't been without its challenges, but equally has been more manageable, enjoyable and rewarding than I'd expected. We use applications like Zoom and Google classroom to continue to participate in our weekly class, access notes and assignments as well as email to communicate with the tutor. By doing so, my classmates and I

have adapted well to online learning and acquired increased digital skills which is a very definite silver lining to the cloud of COVID-19. We stay connected as much as possible by means of a WhatsApp group that we set up at the start of the pandemic, and this I find very beneficial for 'trouble-shooting' about course work or just to have a bit of a chat with a friend every now and then! We all miss the social interaction that has been severely impacted on because of the pandemic and the level of support and attention that would normally be provided to us in person by our tutor when attending the centre.

I'm fortunate enough to possess my own laptop to use to continue with the course remotely but some of my classmates who didn't have access to their own equipment were able to get the loan of computers from the centre as part of a national 'roll-out' scheme that was implemented by the education and training boards, to help alleviate some of the difficulties that learners faced as a result of the pandemic. This proved to be very worthwhile and positive, in my opinion, as people didn't have to incur the expense of buying a computer and could still proceed with their learning in a safe and compliant manner. In order to overcome the issue of not having access to our own printers, some of my classmates and I opt for notes and assignments to be printed and posted out to us by the tutor, which is also very helpful, but can sometimes take a couple of days to be received.

Frequently I experience difficulties with my internet connection which can make online learning much more challenging and frustrating. Unreliable signal can result in delays during the class and an inefficient use of time as the tutor will inevitably have to repeat content a few times to ensure clarity amongst learners. I sometimes feel more tired after an online class than if I was in attendance in the centre and I'm sure I'm not the only one to notice this!

During this pandemic, I have also been able to interact with learners from different parts of the country by participating in the Cork ETB National FET Learner Forum event. I became aware of the Forum through an email from the co-ordinator in my centre. I decided to take part in it as I was eager to hear about other people's learner experiences as well as being able to share my own. I've had the pleasure of meeting and speaking with people of all ages and backgrounds who are engaged in a range of various courses from horticulture and craft to healthcare and more I.T. related courses like myself. The majority of us agree that returning to learning is something that we enjoy and which forms an

important part of our lives even during these difficult and unprecedented times that we all find ourselves in.

For some people the shift to online learning has had many advantages including giving them greater flexibility and freedom to continue their studies while working and maintaining family life. Fortunately, I don't have a long commute from where I live to my local centre, but from taking part in the Learner Forum I also became aware of the lengthy journeys that some people have to make in order to attend their classes under normal circumstances, and they are happy not to have to do that presently. Optimally, a blend of online and centre-based learning is something that I and many other learners would welcome in future as it gives people the 'best of both worlds' by maintaining social interaction with others while being able to learn and upskill in a way that suits our ever-changing lives.

Finally, I think that learners continuing to share their views is crucial for the further development and adaptation of the education and training that is available in centres. Never has this been as evident as during the past year and it goes to show that nothing should be a barrier to education.

Facing the Challenges of Creating Online Critical Dialogical Spaces for Community Learning Pathways into Higher Education (HE)

ISOBEL HAWTHORNE-STEELE, ROSEMARY MORELAND, AND ERIK COWNIE

Abstract

COVID-19 and the looming economic recession threatens adult educators' long-fought battle to create dialogical spaces for transformatory learning. Previous experience of designing and delivering community programmes to marginalised, non-traditional students, has taught us the necessity of building strong tutor-student and student-peer relationships. This paper maps the trajectory of a creative educational outreach response to reconfigure into an online platform. We reflect on the challenges and opportunities presented to us as adult educators, as well as those presented to the adult learners with whom we engaged.

Keywords: Online Learning, Educational Disadvantage, Community Education

Introduction

The move to online learning, due to the current global pandemic, places radical adult education in Northern Ireland in a more precarious situation than ever, demanding innovative responses to engaging in transformatory learning. In recent years, funding for adult education across Europe, Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK) has prioritised an employability skills-based agenda (Murray et al., 2014; Fitzsimons, 2017). Whilst providing education and training that up-skills and or re-skills adults for the labour market is an entirely legitimate and useful outcome of adult learning, especially given the current economic climate, this limited focus does little to promote the wider benefits of adult education, including increasing participation in social and political activities and the creation of learning communities, to tackle major social challenges (AONTAS, 2011; UNESCO, 2016; Learning and Work Institute, 2017).

Freire (1970) warned of the dangers of instrumentalising education, particularly regarding the standardization of curriculum. As adult educators, committed to transformatory practice, we set ourselves the challenge of delivering radical community education practice in an online forum. We must also recognise our privileged positions as university lecturers, whereby we have the academic freedom to design our own curriculum. The obvious danger here is that viewing ourselves as 'experts' we still decide what students should learn (Freire, 1998). Foucault's (1998) understanding of power reminds us that power is everywhere and that whilst challenging injustice in the education system, we must take cognizance of our own place within that system. There is a need for educators to engage in what Pillow (2003, p.188) refers to as 'uncomfortable reflexivity', to be prepared to question our practice and the structures of the institution in which we operate. As educators and activists in the field of community development, reflective practice is a core value and key area of work (ESB, 2015; AIEB, 2016).

Freire's pedagogy highlights the importance of history as a lived experience and the importance of people telling their stories in order to name their oppression (Darder, 2014). It is only through naming the oppression in a collective setting, that people begin to question the individual and community pathological explanations, which they have absorbed without questioning. Ledwith (2020, p.99) argues that 'the use of story [is] at the core of the deeply personal and the profoundly political'. The act of telling one's story and being listened to with respect is a liberatory and transformative experience that leads to empowerment. As Guajardo et al. (2016, p.27) assert, this approach to learning:

> gives participants a new language, a different way of looking at the world, and a network of support that expands their community of practice […] this reframing of our daily conditions from deficits to assets helps build hope and possibilities.

Aware that the COVID-19 restrictions presented huge challenges to our usual community outreach, our key challenge of configuring our community education programme into an online format was to empower individuals to build their collective story of structural inequality and injustice, that leads to empowerment.

Education in a Neoliberal Landscape

Four decades ago, election victories for Thatcher in the UK, and Reagan in the United States (US), and a national economic experiment in Augusto Pinochet's Chile heralded a new social and economic order – one that: cemented and

turbo-charged the advance of global capitalism (Bloom, 2017); and reordered the socio-economic world via a strident emphasis on free market primacy, individual responsibility, and a reconfigured role of the state (Harvey, 2005). The dominance and wide-spread adoption of neoliberalism across much of the globe in the last 40 years has: transformed the core function of states from guardians of human well-being to facilitators of global capital (Stiglitz, 2019); and encouraged states to view citizens as individual entrepreneurs, and state institutions as mechanisms for their reproduction (Davis and Bansel, 2007).

In the UK, Ireland and beyond, the education sector has been fundamentally transformed by this restructuring. Robertson (2007, p.2), for example, claims such shifts have 'altered the conditions for knowledge production' and that 'schools and universities are now […] mandated to create the new breed of entrepreneurs and innovators'. Further afield, Savage's (2017, p.144) Australian study highlights the 'quasi-marketisation of public schooling systems' where schools are encouraged to adopt private sector principles and market-based practices; and the 'economisation of the curriculum' where the 'utility' of learning is assessed in terms of preparing schoolchildren for the knowledge economy (ibid.).

In terms of understanding, and engendering socio-political resistance to these reconfigurations in education, it is important for both educators and learners to first understand the impact of neoliberalism on the dynamic between the state, private enterprise, and the citizenry. Neoliberal states singularly prioritise the needs of the private sector and frame their social and economic policies to best suit the interests of private enterprise (Bloom, 2017). At the same time, public institutions such as schools and hospitals become increasingly viewed by the state as just another part of the market (Harvey, 2010); and education policies are framed around the view that, 'there is nothing distinctive or special about education or health; they are services and products like any other, to be traded in the marketplace' (Peters, 1999 cited in Davis and Bansel, 2007, p.257). As Michel Foucault (2008, p.215 cited in ibid.), whose theories, perhaps better than anyone, explained the complex relationship between power, knowledge, social control and social institutions, has argued, a key aspect of neoliberalism is the relentless commodification of 'domains previously considered to be non-economic'.

There are, unsurprisingly, pedagogical and social justice consequences of neoliberalism's influence over education, which are completely counter to

Freirean (2010) notions of collaborative learning and emancipatory praxis, and Gramsci's (1971) conceptualisation of 'Organic Intellectuals'. Viewed through these prisms of resistance, neoliberalism's 'quasi-marketisation' and curricula 'economisation' of the education sector (Savage, 2017) engenders a pedagogical approach mandated to serve the needs of capital (in terms of producing a globally competitive workforce). Tett and Hamilton (2020) argue that this mandate: encourages and prioritises individual achievement and competition; dissuades collaboration between learners and between educators; and that business principles (e.g. efficiency and profit) are prioritised over important social justice and pedagogical values (e.g. equality, diversity and social responsibility). Similarly, in the south of Ireland, the end of Celtic Tiger has resulted in a neoliberal driven agenda that focuses on regimes of performativity that are characteristic of the marketisation of education. This agenda further compounds the problem of limited access to Higher Education for those marginalised in society (Holland et al., 2016).

Alongside these changes, education policies in the UK and Ireland in recent years have also embraced the neoliberal imperative of individual responsibility by prioritising parental choice (Gallagher, 2019). However, such a policy focus has long been understood as favouring middle class families who can deploy their social, economic and cultural capital to ensure access to the best schools, that their child is educated alongside a cohort of likely high-achievers, and is thus likely to attain HE entry qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). Conversely, poorer children are denied such access and are instead forced to attend underperforming schools in cohorts of likely low achievers and confront a substantial reduced prospect of HE opportunities (Thompson and Ivinson, 2020). This is particularly the case in Northern Ireland where the primary to post-primary transfer system is structured around academic selection – the categorisation of year 8 pupils into grammar (selective) and non-grammar schools (non-selective) according to their performance in a transfer test in year 7. Previous studies, e.g. Gallagher and Smith (2000) and Leitch et al. (2017), have highlighted that this system significantly favours middle class families who, invariably, know the value of education, have a family tradition of academic success, and have the financial means to pay for private tuition around subject specialisms and test preparation. Moreover, these same studies also show that academic selection has a long-term and debilitating impact on those who either fail or do not sit the transfer test.

The unfavourable policy context described above is a challenging one for those committed to transforming the educational landscape by encouraging learning in disadvantaged communities and widening access to HE. Of course, transforming this landscape also requires an understanding of the well-established nexus between poverty and low attainment, and subsequent low levels of participation in HE among poorer families. Previous studies have shown that: children growing up in poorer families routinely emerge from school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007); these educational deficits emerge early in children's lives, even before entry into school, and widen throughout childhood (McNally and Blanden, 2006); and that poorer children have less parental encouragement and support and are more likely to live in a home which is not conducive to their learning (Leitch et al., 2017).

In the context of Northern Ireland (NI), these findings are reinforced by attainment indices which highlight a significant social class attainment gap – as indicated by two important proxies: whether a child attends a grammar or non-grammar school, and free school meal entitlement (FSME). The latest data from the NI Dept. for Education (DENI, 2020) show that: grammar school attendance remains a very strong predictor of attainment (as measured by the five GCSEs matrix); pupils entitled to FSM in both grammar and non-grammar schools have lower attainment than non-FSM pupils; and, in terms of differentiation, the gap between the most affluent (i.e. non-FSM grammar school pupils) and the poorest (i.e. non-grammar school FSM pupils) there is a gap of some 55 percentage points.

Further class-based differentials are evident in the latest data on HE participation rates (UCAS, 2019), which show a significant under-representation of the poorest children in HE. The data here illustrates that, across NI, the combined participation rate of young people from communities in the lowest Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) decile is of the order of 5%. An equitable proportion would be of the order of 10%. In other words, young people in this socio-economic category are probably both unqualified and uninspired to participate in HE. To compound this problem, it is also the case that non-continuation rates (drop-out rates) for those Decile One young people who do go on to university are significantly higher than average (ibid). In terms of trying to explain these class-based attainments and HE participation differentials in a Northern Ireland context, Leitch et al. (2017) also highlighted fatalistic attitudes and negative community norms around education in the most disadvantaged

neighbourhoods – where many young people view school learning as pointless and hold out little hope of ever securing decent employment or advancing to HE.

The social reproduction of educational disadvantage (and privilege) is hardly new, and few sociologists have increased our understanding of this issue more than Pierre Bourdieu. For example, the negative community norms which dissuade young people (and adults) from engaging/re-engaging in education (Willis, 1977) highlight the heuristic value of the work of Bourdieu's (1990) conceptualisations of: Capitals –the social, cultural and symbolic 'assets' at an individual's disposal; Field – the social arenas within which individuals deploy such 'assets'; and Habitus – the subjective dispositions of individuals. As Bourdieu argues: individuals routinely adapt their habitus by including and accepting dominant norms to enable profitable engagement in the 'field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992); and that habitus is a key factor in social reproduction processes because one of the field's most important effects on habitus is to limit the variation between an individual's actions and the constraining norms of their own social group (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, in a community with low levels of academic attainment and high levels of joblessness, it is likely that the affected habitus of local young people will persuade some to view 3rd level education as unattainable, and minimum-wage work, precarious zero-hour contracts or unemployment as inevitable. In such ways, their 'affected habitus dictates to them what is considered achievable and worth aspiring to' (Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010, p.51).

Similarly, Bourdieu's heuristics can help us understand how class privilege is socially reproduced in the context of Northern Ireland's retention of Academic Selection in the primary to post-primary transfer process. Because the current system favours families with a tradition of academic success and the financial means to pay for private tuition, we can argue that the 'field', in this case the Northern Ireland education system, is structured in a fashion which best suits the habitus of middle-class families. In such ways, and in both examples, educational class disadvantage and privilege are simply reinforced and reproduced (Leitch et al., 2017).

Moreover, previous studies have highlighted the social consequences of low attainment and low levels of HE participation within the most disadvantaged communities. For example, Collins et al. (2015) highlight the negative impact on a young person's earning potential and social mobility – likely to be made

yet worse by the post-COVID employment landscape, which is forecasted to be a challenging one for jobs in the low-skill labour market (Deloitte, 2020). Similarly, McNally and Blanden (2006) posit a long-lasting and negative impact of educational failure on the self-esteem and self-confidence of young people; while Moreland and Cownie's (2019) study shows that this impact is often carried through into adulthood – leaving some with a lifelong sense of personal failure – which makes it more difficult for them to properly support their own children's education. In other words, the issue of low attainment and low levels of HE participation really matters at familial and community levels because they deprive disadvantaged families and communities of positive (education) role models (Henderson et al., 2020), perpetuate intergenerational cycles of educational failure, and encourage the idea that educational success and access to HE is the preserve of but certain sections of the social structure (Howieson and Iannelli, 2008; Hillman and Robinson, 2016).

Arguably, one the most insidious aspects of neoliberalist hegemony in education is the normalisation of educational inequality – where working class people come to internalise their relegated status in the educational hierarchy and consequently accept that as they do not have the required 'capitals' (e.g. positive community norms around education, a family tradition of educational success, and the means to pay for private tuition) to enable a successful outcome in the 'field' of education, they simply feel compelled to vacate the 'field' to those who do. Moreover, because of neo-liberalism's hegemonic influence over pedagogical approaches, the media and the wider socio-political society, working class people come to accept that: the continued dominance of neoliberalism (and all that that means for their own life chances) is inevitable and unstoppable; and that because they feel fatalistic about their employment prospects, conclude that there is little point in them engaging or re-engaging in formal education. Of course, exceptions to the rule of success do occasionally occur and are given 'star status' which is used to justify keeping the traditional meritocratic system in place.

In a recent study, Moreland and Cownie (2019) highlight the value of community-based HE access programmes which recognise how difficult it is for adult returners to re-engage and alleviate their anxiety by allowing them to re-engage on their own terms, within their own communities, alongside other local students who they invariably already know. Moreover, the learning and pedagogical approach is reflective, dialectical, based on the students' own lived experience, and underpinned by a commitment to critical thinking and

social justice. Such programmes are a crucial first step towards transformative education and the development of counter-narratives to neoliberalist hegemony. Indeed, as O'Sullivan (2003, pp.328-329) argues, transformative education engenders: 'a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world'; and that this shift illuminates 'our understanding of… our self-locations, our relationships with other humans and… our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender'.

The equally crucial second step towards transformatory praxis is to encourage these returning adult learners to fully engage in critical discourses, recognise and question forms of power previously taken for granted, situate their own learning goals in their own lived experience, value the learning of that lived experience, and collectively (with their working-class neighbours and fellow learners) create new counter narratives and a new spirit of working-class resistance to neoliberal hegemony.

Foucault (2008) makes clear the awesome power neoliberalism has over all aspects of the social and political world – including education. However, he also reminds us that 'where there is power there is resistance' (Foucault, 1998, p.95). Freire (1970), whose central thesis is education as resistance, helps us understand that only in critical dialogical spaces can meaningful critical discourse – the recognition and questioning of power – truly take place; and Foucault (1998 cited in Tett and Hamilton, 2020, p.101) helps us understand the ways in which critical discourse 'undermines [power] […] renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart'.

A Radical Response

Tackling educational under-achievement is a key government priority throughout the United Kingdom. The focus is however predominantly on those under 25 years. Little attention is paid to creating opportunities for older adults to re-engage with education. Yet these are often the parents whose attitudes towards learning and education impact on the next generation. Universities and colleges also have a remit with regard to Widening Access to Third Level education and increasing participation from under-represented groups. We contend that if Third Level institutions are serious about this, they need to bring education out to the communities they seek to serve and create the pathways which can genuinely open access for marginalised groups. Simply opening the doors and inviting people in is not enough!

In 2015, as a response to tackling educational disadvantage, the team designed the Unblocking Potential (UP) course, funded through Ulster University's Centre for Flexible Education and delivered in local community centres. This course enables students to gain an understanding of their own personal as well as the structural barriers to learning, especially within a formal setting. This process of 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1970) enables participants to recognise inequalities in society as the predominant source of educational disadvantage and helps them to question the internalisation of dominant ideology, which holds individuals responsible for their failure in the education system. As opposed to the competitive model of formal education, the course encourages collaborative learning, whereby tutors and learners are all on a journey, and learning from each other are enriched by all. Recognising and valuing participants' informal learning, it seeks to develop self-confidence and self-esteem; to raise aspirations and to equip participants with the skills to study at a higher level. At the heart of this programme is an attempt to demystify education, to lift the burden of failure which many participants have carried throughout their lives and to affirm their capacity to learn. In order to do this, participants needed to overcome the significant challenge of: naming their oppression and in sharing this with others on the programme, rejecting the label of 'failure' which had been imposed upon them as children; and recognising the inequalities in the education system and wider society, which had relegated them to lives of poverty. Previous research carried out with participants highlighted the extent to which this programme acted as a catalyst for their personal empowerment, with one student currently on the BSc Hons Community Development stating:

> The community [UP] course changed everything for me […] made me see that I wasn't stupid […] and could even think about applying to university (Moreland and Cownie, 2019, p.70).

A recent report by the External Examiner of the programme commented:

> I am very impressed with the Unblocking Potential programme, which is ground-breaking work in addressing the widening participation agenda, particularly given that this was now embarking on an online delivery (External Examiner, 2020).

A key question that emerged for the team was how to retain a Freirean model of education, in the face of an enforced online teaching and learning methodology.

Dichotomy of Real and Virtual Learning Spaces: The Educators' Perspective

Freire (1993) claims that regardless of how, when or where education takes place, it is always a political act; it can be never neutral, but rather leads to 'liberation' or 'domestication' (Freire, 1970). As tutors committed to encouraging dialogical learning, which promotes consciousness-raising, we engaged in problem-posing dialogue with each other and with the students, around designing an online learning environment which could continue to support our values as adult educators. Darder (2014, p.9) argues that Freire (1993) 'called upon educators to engage students in a critical understanding of *the world* in order to consider emancipatory possibilities, born from the lived histories and material conditions that shaped their daily lives'. We contend that as adult educators committed to social justice, we are compelled to seek out those whose experience of formal education has led them into the 'culture of silence', where they passively accept the structural inequalities in society, which relegates them 'to become simply reliable workers, complacent citizens and avid consumers' (ibid.), and to offer instead a pedagogy of love and hope (Freire, 1993).

Whilst a Freirean pedagogy has always been at the centre of our educational provision (Moreland, 2007, 2008, 2009; Hawthorne-Steele, 2011; Hawthorne-Steele and Moreland, 2012, 2013; Hawthorne-Steele et al., 2015; Moreland and Cownie, 2019), the COVID-19 crisis brought new challenges to the design and delivery of our teaching. Recognising that most of our students are adult returners, from disadvantaged backgrounds, we were keenly aware that many would have restricted access to the internet; have limited or inadequate access to computers or laptops; and that many would be extremely challenged in using the technology. The emergence of new technologies has excluded and disempowered the poor (Ragnedda, 2017), since they are unable to afford the necessary equipment to access the online platforms. In order to bridge the gap in the digital divide, we adopted what Ragnedda (ibid., p.262) terms as 'a regulating role to protect and include those who are being left behind'.

Attempting to adapt to a new way of working, up-skilling ourselves with online teaching, whilst reassuring students of our continued support and availability placed huge burden on university staff. The university's approach of 'business as usual' meant an almost overnight turnaround in business practices, including the delivery of all teaching and learning support to online platforms. The anxiety that is a prominent feature in our virtual discourses around providing

creative teaching, is summed up in the concern that we do not reproduce a 'banking system' where we become 'authoritarian on one hand or excessively permissive and unfocused on the other' (Darder, 2012, p.112). We need to strike a balance and look for new ways to engage students in the online shared learning environment.

As we grasped the nettle of online teaching on our undergraduate programmes, we were also faced with the question of how we would pursue our aim of providing a gateway to HE for people in local communities who want to re-engage with education. How could we support students returning to formal education to feel a sense of belonging and security, whilst remaining true to our ethos of transformative learning? How would we embrace the challenges and opportunities of new learning technologies? As the whole education system was being moved online, we had almost resigned ourselves to shelving Unblocking Potential (UP) to a Post-COVID rollout. After further discussion, we began to think of possible positive outcomes from an online UP programme. Potential benefits were reduction in travel time and cost; a wider geographical spread; evening delivery could suit those working and those with childcare responsibilities. We sought to create a programme that would benefit participants' mental health through peer support, and focused on a shared learning environment. Brooke et al.'s (2020) review of studies which examined the psychological impact of quarantine suggests that on the whole this is a negative experience, which increases feelings of fear, isolation, loneliness and may contribute to stress, particularly where there are additional pressures at home, financial insecurity or prior mental health issues. These related issues are critical, and as adult educators, we need to be mindful that we do not place unrealistic demands on adult learners who may be experiencing any or all of these. They may also be at the frontline working with those who are struggling with their mental health.

Our key concerns were how to recruit and establish rapport in a completely online environment. In addition, we needed to revisit how the learning tasks would sensitively deconstruct mind-sets of failure, low self-esteem and create consciousness-raising learning within a virtual environment. We believe the key indicators for a successful learning environment for students and tutors are effective communication, a collaborative working relationship, and creative spaces where peer learning can flourish. Our ethos is firmly rooted in the value of the shared learning environment being horizontal rather than vertical where adults bring experiential knowledge and, as Tett, (2012, p.82) determined, this

can lead to 'increasing competence [and] confidence in learning as people [are] regarded as knowledge-rich and thus able to contribute, rather than being seen as suffering from a skills deficit'. We invited one of our graduates, who taught on our UP programmes in the past as a part-time tutor and had recently been made a community ambassador of the University. This tutor worked alongside us to reshape the UP programme to fit a virtual framework. The first challenge was to design the 'getting to know you' exercises, ensuring each student would be given the space to engage with each other as well as the tutors. One of the advantages of a small group (14) using Zoom, was that the video of participants fitted on to the one screen.

This helped tremendously when we began the exercises. As tutors we had in our co-working preparation agreed to create a sense of group by displaying confidence in how we presented each exercise, in order to allow the students to gain self-confidence. We had already journeyed through a period of peer and self-reflection on our presentation skills and technological inefficacy as we began navigating unchartered waters. This was key to our initial meeting with the students. We had to overcome our own hang-ups, fears and reservations about online teaching. Of paramount importance was to ensure the student experience would be a positive one. We especially wanted to ensure the programme would contribute positively to their mental wellbeing during the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 on the quality of their lived experiences. We embedded quick response (QR) matrix barcodes with questions, a continuous polling station and live interactive teaching within the Zoom platform. These techniques proved to be very productive in terms of interaction and the students were very responsive, contributing to the smaller breakout groups and using their mobile phone apps to interface with the QR coded quizzes that were designed to gauge knowledge and understanding. Students also participated in check-in exercises using the virtual platform whiteboard, polling exercise, discussions, questions and posting emotional reactions with the use of 'emojis'.

The response was better than we expected. Each week we met in the virtual environment for two hours of live interaction. There were hiccups such as internet failure and distorted sound at times; however, we overcame these problems by adapting to each situation, switching to WhatsApp group chat or discussions through the 'chat room'. As adult educators we were keen to engage in on-going evaluations reviewing each segment of the programme and addressing any issues that occurred. During the first session, 60% of the group revealed they were dealing with mental health issues and most stated they were

nervous about talking in a virtual space. The fact that they felt comfortable enough to disclose personal information at such an early stage and to a group of relative strangers was, as one student expressed, 'surprisingly cathartic'. We believe the dynamic of group connection was due to the effort made to encourage students to engage in the 'getting to know you' exercises. This allayed our fears that students might not engage in critical consciousness raising learning within an online setting. From the outset students' participation levels were high, and drawing from the trust established with each other, their self-confidence increased; even in the very early stages they were open to learning through critical reflection. The measure of success is reflected in the QR coded evaluations completed by students.

Adult Learners' Lived Experiences of UP Online

Students stated they did face difficulties in working and studying at home. There is the distraction of caring for young children, juggling homework; finding a balance has taken its toll on the wellbeing of students who were already suffering with mental health issues pre-COVID-19. When asked if participating in the course increased their self- confidence, one participant stated: 'it gave me a positive boost and the confidence to return to university'. The key to learning in this online environment was the positive relationship built up between students and tutors. The responses reflect the importance of building rapport between tutor and student that is firmly rooted in establishing a shared learning environment. This contributes to the learning experience, encouraging students to interact and feel a sense of self-worth and being valued:

> The tutors were very helpful and supportive [Student A].

> The tutors were excellent. Prepared me for uni [Student B].

> The programme gave me the opportunity to take part in a programme in my own relaxed environment, without having to leave home [Student C].

This is an important take away for adult educators to recognise the benefits of remote learning rather than our preconceived notion that online, learning would be too difficult for them:

> Truthfully, I loved it, it gave me a sense of achievement and my confidence has greatly improved, I enjoyed everything the UP material had to offer. [Student B].

Considering I have no qualifications, and my experience of formal education has been awful, this programme was a challenge, and gave me confidence. [Student D]. The feedback was encouraging as it resonates with Mezirow et al.'s (2000, p.8) argument that given the right educational environment, the learner can engage in transformative learning by 'constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of meaning of an experience in the world'. The majority of participants said they had previously 'struggled with learning', many expressed they had a negative experience of formal school life stating their 'teachers lacked empathy, respect and care'.

Students were invited to reflect on whether or not they thought the course helped improve their mental wellbeing. The responses indicate this was an important aspect of their progress, and indeed students who stated they had mental health problems said it was of vital importance to have a 'relaxed and informal setting', and 'being given the opportunity to meet other mature students'. The content and method of delivery also contributed to the student wellbeing experience. This was evident in comments, which indicated students felt less stressful having experienced how the course was delivered:

The programme was very interactive and stress free [Student E].

This was my first time studying online and it felt seamless [Student A].

These comments from students exemplify the importance of designing an interactive online programme that takes cognisance of the low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. As experienced adult educators, we ensured that the online programme design was framed around andragogical principles. The key learning outcomes illustrate that the wellbeing of students is dependent upon establishing a good relationship between tutor and student, creating a shared learning experience.

Students expressed their frustrations of not being able to gain access to many of the individuals and groups in their communities whom they would normally engage with, as COVID-19 restrictions placed on their working schedules excluded contact. Some were furloughed and had little or no engagement apart from voluntary community food delivery and communicating by post/telephone. In many instances, groups were using the technology of websites such as Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp, Facetime, Twitter etc. to connect with groups and individuals. However, this was problematic for those most

vulnerable who did not have access to these platforms. Indeed, it is clear that online engagement diminishes the learning experience and is a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction. Moreover, a common feature that has impacted students has been the additional stresses that COVID-19 has uncovered with uncertainties of employment, caring for family, relatives either ill or passing away. A recent discussion paper developed by the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including community education issues) Working Group (MED) (2020, p.3), chaired by AONTAS, highlighted some of the difficulties faced by adult learners:

> Some adult learners fear for their lives due to existing health conditions; this is especially true for older learners, those with existing health conditions and for many learners with a disability. Indeed, during this period of unprecedented change, learners are experiencing loss of all kinds, and some will be grieving loved ones. A large number of learners are also dealing with the psychological, social, and financial impacts of job loss.

Students who engaged in the UP programme produced some highly innovative and creative ideas that were invaluable to the mental wellbeing of those experiencing isolation and mental health issues. Enabling participants to overcome their fears and doubts about their ability to learn is a key feature of the programme, which necessitated continual positive re-enforcement and signposting to student support where appropriate. The programme has been fortunate enough to gain funding from the University's widening participation grant. Nevertheless, the programme operates on a very limited budget and normally relies on local community organisations supporting the programme, through providing a venue, in some cases hospitality to participants, free crèches and buses to bring students to the university campus. Our programme clearly outlines the benefits to individuals, communities and the university of bringing education to the people. We hope that this work can gain greater support so that more people can re-engage with learning in a positive environment, which values their experiences, builds their self-esteem and restores their humanity.

Adult Educators' Lived Experiences of Online Teaching
Disruption to the normal style of delivery, forcing staff to find an alternative method to engage with students and build a dialogical learning space was extremely challenging. For adult learners the challenges of working from home are problematic. This corresponds to issues found by the MED (2020) report which highlighted issues associated with lack of access to conducive learning

spaces. Adult educators share some of these frustrations; for example, finding quiet spaces to work at home, coupled with the demands of technology and providing extra support to students who already face insecurities about their ability to engage in education processes. The institutional response of HE to this unprecedented crisis focussed on a 'business as usual' approach. The MED (ibid, p5) report suggests that community educators may be at greater risk of burnout, as tutors are challenged by the use of online tools and community organisations often relied on staff goodwill, to 'work over and above'. Our experiences in designing and delivering online outreach community education support these findings. In addition, staff reported themselves feeling stressed due to the difficult situations and vulnerabilities disclosed by students.

Conclusion

Our paper started by framing neoliberalism as diametrically opposed to the Freirean values of emancipatory praxis. We contend however that 'within a complex and contradictory world […] there exists spaces and opportunities for radical practice within such an environment' (Beck and Purcell, 2020, p.41). One significant outcome from the UP online programme has been the realisation that by having to face this digital dilemma on a shared platform, the relationship between the adult learner and adult educator has advanced our aim of horizontal learning, in other words, non-hierarchical learning which presupposes that knowledge exists within a community whose members are willing to learn from each other (Li, 2017). The participation of students was high, and this led us to ascertain that for future online programmes it is essential to spend time establishing relationships by using a variety of group and individual exercises. By following our modus operandi to create the space, time and exercises to encourage students to experience a sense of belonging, we succeeded in creating a caring and empathic learning space, where students can gain confidence to tell their stories of being made to feel *not good enough* and in sharing their stories collectively, they begin to reframe their world. Tackling educational disadvantage and underachievement is not an easy task and we do not claim that this programme is a quick fix. Many participants who embarked on the programme are dealing with complex personal situations and come from backgrounds where education has never been prioritised.

The participants who have embarked upon the programmes outlined in this paper have embarked upon this journey of transformation, each starting from a different point and moving through this journey at their own pace. We believe these participants are in the process of becoming 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci,

1971), with opportunities to create change within their local communities. They are at the intersection of theory and praxis, and through dialogue they critically analyse and change their own social constructs. Having broken through hegemonic barriers of social, economic and cultural oppression, they continue, as we all do, to struggle with the process of impacting social transformation. How we as adult educators manipulate these opportunities that are conducive to the virtual learning environment is challenging in the midst of this global COVID-19 crisis. Ledwith (2020, p.232) suggests 'radical community development needs to step up to play its role in a praxis for our times'. We need to skill up our knowledge of technology to create innovative interactive digital learning spaces. We need to learn how to respond to a diverse range of support needs of non-traditional students who are further isolated from real time educational opportunities. The dichotomy of real and virtual learning spaces remains problematic and requires vigilance. Notwithstanding the potential utilisation of online spaces under the neo-liberal guise of rationalisation, this online learning initiative has furnished us with a series of creative engagement processes for learners who face challenges travelling to university. In this new world we perhaps also need to pay more attention to the social crisis that adult learners face and develop a keener empathetic ethos that recognises the challenges they face within their personal and social lived experiences.

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A Pandemic Was Not in Our Plan!

SUSAN CULLINANE, STEFANIE LARKIN, CONOR O'LEARY, AND ZORYANA PSHYK

Abstract

This article has been created following a process of collaborative reflective dialogue and writing between members of the Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board Community Education Team. We reflected on the experience of providing community education during the COVID-19 pandemic and mapping the next steps as we navigated living with COVID-19. We explored the ways we supported and upskilled learners, tutors, and each other as a team, all while continuing to navigate our way forward in the reality of living with COVID-19 and the implications it might have for the future of community education.

Keywords: Community Education Pedagogy, Resilience, Collective Trauma, Group Work, 'Capacitar', Communities of Practice, Technology Enhanced Learning

Introduction

Modelling the values of community education, this article is the result of a process of navigation, reflection, and orientation by the Community Education (CE) team of Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB) on a path through COVID-19 and towards the development of a post-COVID-19 programme. The team consists of the community education facilitator, outreach worker and two key tutors. Our Administrator was on sick leave but otherwise would have been a participant. The process consisted of a dialogue on Zoom, recorded by the Otter app, forming the basis of subsequent dialogues and collaborative writing. Pseudonyms have been used to anonymise the discussion.

Pre-COVID-19, we felt community education was best done in person; we did not have a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) strategy and most of us had

not heard of Zoom. We develop educational responses to needs identified by community groups in Co. Kildare, complemented by a smaller number of our own initiatives. Falling under the remit of SOLAS, we operate within the CE guidelines and targets. Areas of tension within the work include balancing a group centred pedagogy with the administrative needs of the ETB/SOLAS, management of a small staff team with high ambitions, and increasing community demand. In addition, the precarious nature of the working conditions of CE tutors means there is a high turnover of staff (Fitzsimons, 2017; O'Neill and Cullinane, 2017).

We experienced the pandemic as a 'disorienting dilemma' (Eschenbacher and Fleming, 2020, p.4). Themes emerging include maintaining contact with learners, tutors, and each other; learning online in a crisis, taking CE pedagogy online, returning to in-person learning, and living with COVID-19.

Maintaining Contact
Team
Although expected, when the country went into lockdown, it was still a shock:

> It was a very intense and surreal moment when the Taoiseach made that announcement and we all started that mental calculus around, okay, so what now and evaluating the risks and the unknown situation that we were going into. And the pace of things was moving very fast and trying to think, okay, how do we start supporting our learners? What can we do? We can't just cut them loose and let go (Isolde).

Team support was the priority, so we could then support others. We had regular meetings online, check-ins and when restrictions allowed, a socially distanced outdoor lunch.

> How we were able to support each other in our team. And kind of encourage each other through this process of learning in very, very fast pace, supporting each other, and then trying to support the tutors, and then trying to support the learners, and how all of that worked out in such a good way. We had a such, I suppose, a humanistic approach, but also a team approach to everything (Maria).

Many including AONTAS and Bríd Connolly have written about the importance of personal relationships as core to CE, so maintaining contact with ourselves,

tutors and groups/learners was intrinsic to our response (AONTAS, 2020, p.8; Connolly, 2008, p.74).

Tutors

Once the Team was working remotely, we turned our attention to tutors. 'In order to secure our learners, we need to secure our tutors, because how can our tutors hold a space for learners if they're not feeling grounded themselves' (Patrick). We offered workshops on 'Using Zoom' and 'Tutoring in a Time of Uncertainty', to bring tutors together and upskill them, highlighting the person-centred aspect of our approach as outlined by Bríd Conolly (Connolly, 2008, p.31). Later we offered 'Capacitar', Practical Self-Care Practices (Capacitar International, 2020). One of our tutors had experience of working in crisis situations and we learned a lot from her:

> Capacitar, a program developed in response to traumatic experiences in places of conflict. And as a learning community together, we had the opportunity to be in this safe space, where we could share our responses to COVID-19, how we experienced it, how our families experienced it and the practices that were facilitated with us by amazing facilitators Patty Abozaglo and Stefanie Larkin. It was just so deep and so new because it's not like, let's say maybe yoga, something that you experience on your own, it's communal, you're sharing as well as practicing, and it was really an empowering process for all of us (Maria).

A key support to tutors was that they continued to be paid for the work that was interrupted due to lockdown. 'Tutors got paid. The whole sector is so uncertain anyway, at the best of times, that I thought that was massive, actually, and it gave us sort of a foundation and allowed people to think about other things and reflect' (Julia). We expected learners would have difficulties around IT equipment or skills, but it was surprising tutors did too, as highlighted by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) (EAEA, 2020, p.1). They do not work many hours with us; they did not have a laptop or maybe there was one for the household. As we paid attention to the emerging needs of the community by 'creating spaces in which new practices and novel forms of knowledge and understanding can emerge' (Finnegan, 2016, p.55), there was a feeling of community solidarity being fostered within our practice. We set up 'communities of practice' for tutors and the team as well as a network space for group leaders to solidify and embed this into our practice (Wenger, 2015, p.1).

Groups/Learners

Groups responded in different ways; we did not know how long it would last but doing nothing was not an option:

> It's the disability service users or the Down Syndrome Association that's just that bit closer to health service delivery in its outlook, or, you know, they're the people who can straight away, click in, okay, we have a problem here, we need to do something, what are we going to do? Whereas, you know, a community group that might be dealing with isolation or a social piece, that just goes on and on, and people wait for a magic light bulb to go off (Julia).

Initial contact was by phone, groups supporting each other on WhatsApp, through online video messages of support, mail-outs to groups and posting of packs of materials so that groups could continue their work. These methods were used throughout Europe as recorded by the EAEA (EAEA, 2020. p.1). We were trying to get the balance between:

> They're telling us shut down, isolate, cocoon guidelines, the language around that and then we're about community connection and staying connected and stemming isolation. So, it's kind of, how we can do both. And so that's where technology stepped in and I saw it with my own group, the mixed media group. From meeting in the centre on the Wednesday mornings, my class was kind of reframed into an art journaling course on WhatsApp (Isolde).

Participants described the experience of receiving their art materials in the post as an offering of hope, connection, and creativity. One participant created a postcard for her grandchild every week, while cocooning, an intimate dialogue that can be described as a 'creative prayer' (McNiff, 1992, p.3.) Those small things we cannot quantify are very powerful. However, an ongoing concern is for groups that have not engaged at all:

> I get the sense that, um, there is a bit of a Zoom fatigue with a few groups that I've met. So, rather than even come on Zoom, they are not going to engage at all. Those groups have kind of fallen apart because they've lost that space to meet weekly and they don't have the capacity to stay together in any other way. I'd be worried about those groups (Isolde).

To respond to disconnected groups, we are carrying out a listening survey, to connect with the groups and assess their needs so we can best support their reconnection.

Learning Online

We were unprepared for a pandemic. We had not developed a pedagogy for community education in a blended format let alone completely online. We are delivering emergency learning online, developing it as we go, with mixed results. As highlighted by the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including community education issues) Working Group (MED), chaired by AONTAS;

> It is not business as usual. Many disadvantaged learners do not have access to IT equipment, WIFI, academic support within the home or digital skills to engage in their course. Learners are removed from their programmes, isolated from their learning community and experiencing a health pandemic. In addition, some learners may be living in overcrowded and unsafe conditions. This may cause short, medium and perhaps long-term damage (2020, pp.2-3).

We set up a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Community of Practice for IT tutors and developed a model to support engaging with online learning. In response to digital poverty, we loaned devices and gave support with Wi-Fi issues. The model recognised four levels of learner need depending on their starting point.

Step 4	Internet Access Possible and Access to Computer
Step 3	Internet Access Possible and Smartphone only
Step 2	No Internet Access and Access to Smartphone or Temporary Access to Computer
Step 1	No Internet Access and Basic Phone or No Technology

Crucially, an IT tutor supported learners and project tutors for the first two sessions of online classes. Where needed, one-to-one phone support in advance was also provided, since, as raised by the Learning and Work Institute, those who might benefit most are least likely to take part (2020, p.1). For a significant number of learners, personal help is needed to support the initial transition to online learning:

> They're not going to be able to log into something, unless they have someone there who can be at the other end of the phone, who can talk them through. That has lots of knock-on effects in terms of the way you think about learning for people, but also in terms of respecting the other people in the group. People are at different levels, you know so something about respecting that

difference, and acknowledging it and adapting to it. And while we've made a pretty good fist of it, it's still a struggle for us, I feel because we're trying to adapt to constructs around teaching in classes and things like that, that doesn't lend itself very well to being flexible and adaptable in that way (Julia).

We loan devices for the duration of a project, offering learners a window of hope and connection. We face an ethical dilemma in taking those devices back so we can support others. We are exploring options in partnering with other organisations to be able to give low-cost devices to disadvantaged learners that they can keep, enabling ongoing progression.

Initially, we envisaged online learning as a temporary measure in the event of further lockdowns. A year later most learning is online. Critically, there was a willingness to engage and take the opportunity. Whether it was an older person willing to try it, or a group feeling they had no alternative because people were cocooning:

> She was able to participate remotely, in a funeral of a family member from United States. And she was crying while she was sharing this with me, and it touched me so deeply that we were able to give her that connection that was so important to her. Then she shared a funny story that one of her younger family members came on Zoom to the funeral after having a shower with her head covered in a towel, and she said, we were calling her saying to her, switch off your camera, because we can see you got out of the shower! These stories of sadness, and the joy of life and laughter keep us going and give us this feeling that we bring meaningful education that is not only, you know, geared towards some type of learning outcome or some type of certificate, but it's an education that is meaningful to people in their lives (Maria).

> The other ones I think are inspiring are the Down Syndrome Association. They, unlike some of the other entities are all volunteers and the motivation and push to get things going again, despite all the hurdles, and the complications in the bureaucracy of trying to deliver something safely. It shows the importance of motivation (Julia).

Community Education Online

A key concern has been maintaining the values and participatory nature of community education online. CE is an approach relevant to the needs of learners, participatory and dialogical in nature, prompting critical reflection and creating the potential for transforming the world through reflection and

action as outlined by Paulo Freire (Freire, 1996, p.48). We attended online training offered by other organisations further ahead of us in this practice:

> I came across this training by Global Ecovillages Network called Weaving Communities Together in the Time of Crisis. I thought that's what we need, to weave the groups together. And it was my first experience of participating in something like that online and experiencing the possibilities that Zoom can offer, and how Zoom can support the values of community education, to make conversations participatory and to keep group work going at a time when we cannot see each other in face-to-face situations. I was really inspired by the quality of content of the workshop and by the way it was facilitated and learning about how collective traumatic experiences can be overcome when people come together and share their stories, and how through sharing these stories, they can support each other (Maria).

> One of the good things that we did was trauma informed education, and we introduced those principles to the resilience groups. When you mention the word trauma people think of landslides or earthquake or refugee camps, and absolutely, that is trauma, but the smaller traumas of life, like living in poverty, domestic violence, and financial abuse, and you know, those small grinding things that affect people's daily life are traumatising. Bad childhood experiences, bad education experiences, all those things. The trauma isn't the act of trauma, it's how we embody it and the emotions from the trauma (Isolde).

Before COVID-19 we were exploring ways of embedding CE pedagogy into tutor's practice. By bringing tutors together for support and upskilling during COVID-19, we developed a series of 'communities of practice' in Resilience, TEL and Community Art and Creativity (Wenger, 2015, p.1):

> We wanted it to be a space of listening, for the participants to share their experiences, so that we would know how to respond to the needs of the community going forward, what our community education program is going to look like in the autumn (Maria).

The exploration of different technologies (Zoom, breakout rooms, video tutorials, Jamboard, second cameras for creative work) and methodologies (working on individual art pieces while online with class group, activities away from the camera, movement) supported online participatory learning and development of best practice of community education online.

Living with COVID-19

When restrictions eased there was hesitancy in going back to in-person learning. There was fear due to underlying health conditions, venues did not re-open or could not accommodate social distancing. Online seems an easier option while things are still uncertain:

> It's nearly easier now to organise something online. There's a bit more certainty. We're not trying to figure out is this venue compliant? The complete reverse of where things were. I think there's a real value in modelling a safe way of people meeting, you know, and for groups especially. But you can't impose that on people either (Julia).

We are concerned about learners and groups that have not engaged online. We are developing responses that would enable groups to try out online learning and have a safe social gathering, possibly outdoors, to maintain group connection and help groups develop a model:

> A lot of the resilience stuff we talk about is about individual resilience, and wellbeing but, you know, if a community group falls apart, or it can't figure its way, there's a resilience problem. At one level, yes, you want to encourage people to meet but then if you're encouraging people to meet, are you putting them at risk? If people aren't meeting that's not going to be good for them. While Zoom is good and opens a certain number of doors, it's not a replacement for face-to-face contact. And, you know, if we're talking about living with this, it really does involve finding a way that people can interact in a safe way and making that visible and making that real (Julia).

While the move to online learning happened suddenly, we expect the return to in-person learning will happen slowly. It gives us an opportunity to think about how we want things to be in the future. 'It isn't the case of, going back to normal, whatever normal was, and is that a place we want to go back to? What are the kind of sustainable ways community education [can] go forward? (Patrick). We see it as a three-phase process, first we responded, now we are going into a recovery phase, and finally there will be a need to rebuild what has been lost. We envisage recovery will involve an emphasis on human interaction and wellbeing, with a focus on trauma informed education:

> I don't think it's the time to say yes, we have to get on with it. I think we have to start thinking, how to accept it, and how to recognise it first, how

can we recognise how this collective trauma impacted the whole society and individuals, because only by recognising and accepting we can move forward to building resilience (Maria).

While online learning has been a valuable stopgap for many, we are keenly aware a permanent 'shift to remote on-line learning will exacerbate inequalities, not only in the Global South but even in the most well-resourced corners of the planet' (International Commission on the Futures of Education 2020, p.1). However, we expect blended learning will be a feature of all aspects of provision from now on:

But when you do it well, you can get that connection, which I mean, opens a whole lot of things for us in terms of learners, in terms of travel. Maybe we can make connections with other community education groups and do online exchanges (Patrick).

In parallel, we need to focus on critical digital media skills, we must 'ensure digitalisation does not undermine privacy, free expression, informational self-determination or lead to abusive surveillance. It is an illusion to think that online learning is the way forward for all' (International Commission on the Futures of Education 2020, p.1). 'The proliferation of various conspiracy theories about where this all came from […] education has to take into account what's going on in society. Because otherwise, you're not going to break down those barriers (Julia).

There will be increased need for outreach to re-engage with groups. At a Group Leader workshop, participants talked about longing to see the faces and expressions of their group members:

A lot of the feedback from the workshops was how people got through COVID-19 while spending time in their garden and nature […] courses around nature, I think and then bringing into that, the awareness of our environment and climate change and the effect (Isolde).

COVID-19 has absorbed all our attention recently, but the issues of climate justice, poverty, racial oppression, and globalisation, to name a few, and their intersectionality are now more pressing than ever. We need to continue to engage learners in critical conversations around these issues as we contribute to civic society (Department of Education and Skills, 2012, p.1). Based on the results of our listening survey we will explore new ways of engaging learners

through outdoor education and developing good practice in the area of sustainability. We will continue to create spaces to listen to the voices of those who are not always heard, supporting them to bond around issues and become active agents.

Conclusion

COVID-19 prompted creative ways of engagement and learning for our CE team, tutors, and learners. We made a conscious effort to prioritise contact and support, working together was the only way of navigating these uncertain times. Stories of positive experiences of community education that our learners share inspire us as a team to navigate the tensions we experience in our work. Despite working from a bottom-up approach in a hierarchical organisation, balancing workload versus capacity, precarious work conditions of tutors and increasing community demand, we try to keep our heads above water and look for creative solutions to the problems created by the neoliberal narrative. The pandemic perpetuated inequalities by revealing the wounds of marginalised communities to the world. Despite the ongoing support that we can offer, we struggle to support all the learners. Issues of disengagement due to lack of internet access and devices are very real. They existed way before the pandemic, and, despite the support we can offer, digital poverty is not going anywhere soon.

Many courses and activities did not change during COVID-19, but the context and the environment through which they were delivered and experienced was radically different, making the essential work of community education even more critical. We developed communities of practice to bring and sustain community education pedagogy online. Our TEL (Technology Enhanced Learning) community of practice has supported over 130 learners and tutors. During 2020, we supported 59 groups reaching 378 learners.

We believe that using a person-centred approach while fostering a participatory pedagogy of community education with groups of tutors, who in turn facilitated it with CE learners, helped us all become resilient during this time of crisis. We look to the future with the hope of reconnecting communities, wrapping them in our love and support, fostering resilience, creativity, and participation. We will not stop being true to our values, even though a pandemic was not in our plan.

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Blended to Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Practice

MICHAEL KENNY, JOSEPHINE FINN, MARGARET NOONE, MARY SHEEHY, FINOLA BUTLER, AND DENISE SHANNON

Abstract

A synergetic partnership of the Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education and the Further Education Support Services identified an educational need among Further Education and Training (FET) staff. The outcome was a jointly developed and delivered Level 9 blended learning Postgraduate Certificate in Programme Design and Validation in Further Education and Training (PGPDV). The delivery of the pilot course was significantly challenged by COVID-19's sudden arrival in March 2020, forcing the course fully online. This article gathers feedback on lessons learned and offers practical steps to guide adult educators in pivoting courses for online delivery.

Keywords: COVID-19, Blended-Learning, Online-Learning, Student Feedback

'It was all going so well until the pandemic struck' – March 2020.

Context

In the recent past, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector has been undergoing extensive change at all levels of organisation. The thirty-three Vocational Education Committees (VECs) were reconfigured into sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in 2013, and the education function of FÁS was transferred into the ETBs for local and regional coherence. Alongside these macro changes came many regulatory policies. The most relevant to the content of this article was the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Policies and Criteria for the Validation of Programmes of Education and Training (revised 2017), that changed the quality assurance processes underpinning programme development for FET providers.

The Further Education Support Service (FESS) had ongoing discussions with Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education on ways in which they could jointly support the professional development of FET staff. Feedback from FESS staff about the new QQI validation criteria identified their need for education and training that would support course developers to implement (QQI) Policies and Criteria for Programmes in Education and Training. Arising, the Level 9 CPD (Continuous Professional Development) Certificate in Programme Design and Validation was developed in 2019.

Profile of Collaborative Partners

The Further Education Support Service (FESS) was set up in 1997 to provide ongoing support to Education and Training Board (ETB) FET staff and SOLAS-funded providers offering programmes leading to QQI certification. The FESS operates through the respective ETBs via an independent steering committee and is funded by SOLAS.

Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education (MUDACE) is the only higher education academic adult education department in the Republic of Ireland. Established independently in 1974, the department's course provision ranges from short part-time certificate courses and flexible degrees to postgraduate and doctorate level courses.

Finola Butler (FESS) and Dr. Josephine Finn (MUDACE) devised the 20-credit Level 9 blended learning certificate in Programme Design and Validation in Further Education and Training (PGPDV) and Maynooth University accredited the course in August 2019.

Introduction

The innovative pilot Postgraduate Certificate course commenced in January 2020 with nineteen registered students: seventeen participants from nine ETBs and two participants from independent FET providers. The student profiles are outlined in Figure 1.
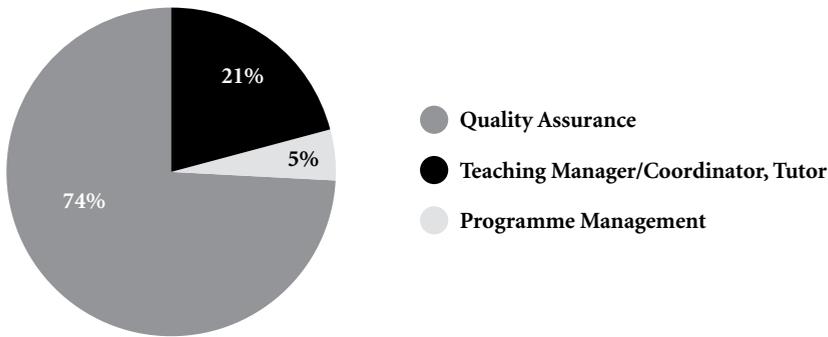
Figure 1. PGPDV Student Profiles? Roles in FET

This case study will outline the course, it's mode of delivery, and how the course had to adjust to the COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020. Nothing has had such a system-wide impact at all levels of education and training delivery as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Course Team

The PGPDV Course Teaching Team (hereafter the course team) comprised three members from FESS and four members from MUDACE including the course e-moderator who provided technical and ongoing student support, and an administrator. Initially monthly team meetings were scheduled where the team dealt with all aspects of course planning and delivery.

Course Outline

The PGPDV course was co-designed and delivered in a collaborative partnership. Its purpose was to address the needs of FET staff tasked with the redesign of existing, or the development of new, FET programmes. While the QQI Policies and Criteria for Programme Design and Validation Guidelines document provided the impetus for the course, the course also addressed the general principles of course design and validation.

The course objectives were to:

• Explore the implications of current policies in FET programme design and validation

- Further develop knowledge, skills and competencies in curriculum design for programmes leading to awards from QQI and other awarding bodies, e.g. City & Guilds

- Examine curriculum design requirements associated with validation applications

- Provide and critically review theoretical and policy frameworks of adult and further education

- Provide participants with the opportunity to critically reflect on evaluation and quality assurance procedures for programme validation

The course consisted of three mandatory modules:

1. Validation of programmes in FET – history, policy, and governance (5 credits)

2. Curriculum theory and application in programme development (10 credits)

3. Critical evaluation and quality assurance in programme validation (5 credits)

Theoretical Framework
A collaborative partnership by its nature brings people together from different contexts and with different approaches and philosophical positions. In some instances, these different perspectives can be difficult to negotiate, especially if positions are entrenched. On the other hand, in an open and trusting environment, different approaches can be explored and critiqued, and, through dialogue, can deliver new insights that allow creativity to flourish. This was the case in this collaboration. Without exception our, FESS and MUDACE, philosophical orientations differed and spanned across the range of adult education theory and educational purposes. The partners explored some of these ideas and their deliberations eventually rested with Malcolm Knowles' (1984, pp.46-49) four andragogical principles:

- **Adults learn better from experience (even if they make mistakes):** It was recognised that some members of the learning group had significant experience of course design and that these experiences would be invaluable to the collective learning of the group

- **Adults favour a pragmatic approach and must be able to apply learning to solve a specific problem:** The course assessment addressed the challenge of applying awarding body course validation requirements to newly designed

courses. Students would apply their learning by designing a course relevant to their work context for validation. The PGPDV course provided opportunities to critique programme validation policy and criteria; learn technical skills for programme development (writing learning outcomes, devising assessment criteria, exploring styles of RPL); and to examine concepts related to programme design

- **Adults are most interested in learning things that have immediate relevance**: The course was designed to address FET course validation needs currently pertinent for FET staff

- **Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction:** As a pilot course, ongoing formal and informal feedback invited students to suggest adjustments on the structuring of course delivery

These principles and the teaching team's commitment to the centrality of student support guided course delivery.

Blended Learning Design

The original course was a blended learning design with six face-to-face workshops using participative adult education delivery methodologies. This approach normally involves significant group-work and interactive exercises to enable students to process shared knowledge, engage in critical reflection and question accepted practice assumptions. Thus, the central spine of this blended learning course would provide reflective space for students to process their learning together supported by asynchronous virtual learning environment (VLE) materials, workshops and webinars. Figure 2. charts the proposed blended learning design.

1. Induction face-to-face workshop
2. Five face-to-face workshops over the academic year
3. Content upload and participant engagement through Moodle (Maynooth University Virtual Learning Environment)
4. Programme assessment
   i.   Programme proposal presentation (Required but not marked)
   ii. Academic essay
   iii. Design of FET programme validation proposal and complete the respective validating body self-assessment report
   iv. Present an end of course review of learning

Figure 2. Blended Learning Design

In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, it became evident that the course team had to consider the implications and consult with the students about the future of the course. The response of the team was to re-imagine the course with everything changed – relationships, knowledge sharing, presentation of content, support arrangements and indeed the learning process itself.

Methodology

A reflective approach was fundamental to writing this article. The course team shared their experience and insights, while students provided feedback through Microsoft Teams, check-ins, and anonymised feedback collected through Mentimeter.com and Microsoft Forms. Student feedback was collated highlighting consistent and sometimes surprising outcomes. The outcomes were adopted to create a fully online course and are described in the following.

Adjustments Adopted by Course Team Following COVID-19 Restrictions

On 13th March, 2020, the Maynooth University Registrar instructed staff to move all teaching online with immediate effect. The course team met at short notice and decided to:

1. Consult with all students to hear their concerns and discuss the future of the course

2. Cancel upcoming face-to-face workshops

3. Begin planning fully online delivery

4. Meet weekly

Impact of COVID-19 Restrictions

While the course requirements could not be changed, the course team wanted to ensure that students could voice their concerns and be involved in the decision-making process about course delivery changes. The first task was to contact each student via phone. The feedback from students was:

- The COVID-19 restrictions were being applied concurrently to their work with knock-on effects on their professional and personal situations

- Students were deeply unsettled by the situation but wished to continue

- Students requested a course delivery pause for six weeks to adjust

- That the course team should devise a plan for online delivery and circulate to students for feedback

- To revert to the original format once restrictions were lifted

Based on this the course team set about redesigning the course delivery.

Redesign: A Model for Online Delivery

The course was redesigned at the following levels – structure and timetabling; knowledge sharing; learning processes and relationship building; and student support. The e-moderator role would change significantly as students would need greater support to learn new tools and skills that might be unfamiliar to them for fully online learning.

- **Structure and timetabling** needed to change to ensure best fit with students' work/life schedules. This required the course team meet regularly to manage change and provide consistent responses to course adaptations. A new timetable was devised to offer certainty in uncertain COVID-19 times

- **Knowledge sharing**: Course content was uploaded to Moodle (the University VLE) on the same day every two weeks with consistent format of each upload. Live interactive webinars were delivered at the same time on the same afternoon every two weeks. Webinars were recorded on MS Teams and uploaded onto the relevant Moodle section for those unable to attend, those that had internet connection challenges, where their personal situation made attendance difficult, or where they wished to watch it back for consolidation of learning

- **Learning processes and relationship building**: Weekly one-hour check-ins were held on Wednesday evenings at 8:00pm. The check-in time was agreed following student consultation so that children would be in bed and parenting students would be free to engage. Check-ins were recorded on Microsoft Teams and uploaded to Moodle as noted above. The Microsoft Teams App was used for seamless communications between the course team and the students and for peer-to-peer communication

- **Student Support:** Keeping student needs at the centre, students were invited to contact any member of the course team as required via email, telephone and

weekly check-ins. The e-moderator was the first point of contact although all members of the course team engaged in student support. Figure 3. outlines the Online Delivery Model
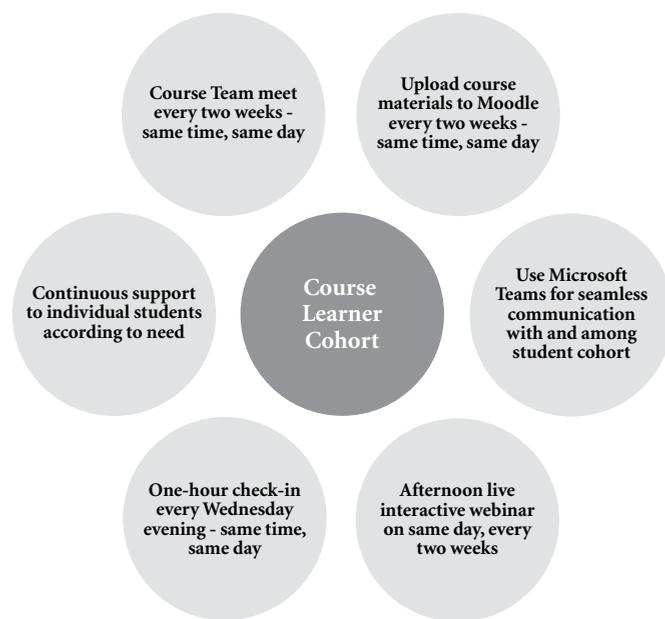
Figure 3. Online Delivery Model for the PGPDV Course

Student Feedback

Through regular student feedback, students were directly involved in the redesign of the course. For this article, the feedback was augmented by detailed interviews with small student groups. The feedback, with verbatim comments, is documented in the following.

a. Online model: The students had not originally applied for a fully online course. Therefore, their mixed feedback is understandable.

'The recordings were very important particularly when we had wi-fi issues'.

'The Moodle site is difficult to navigate – wrecks my head at times trying to locate a particular file'.

'The structure of putting up the readings on Moodle bi-weekly on a Monday evening was clear. It should be there from the start'.

'Adding an online element will add to the experience of the course in a positive way'.

'If I had known it was all going to be online […] I would have waited until the next round '.

Course add-ons such as recording webinars and check-ins assisted students.

b. Values: The notion of 'quality assurance in action' was confirmed in the interviews.

'The way the course responded to the lockdown was quality assurance in action […] we moved from what we had planned, and we put an emergency plan in place to keep going. I thought it was very transformative'.

c. Support: When students are at the centre of course delivery, support cannot be compromised. Student feedback suggests that the course team delivered excellent student support. Seventeen course students completed the course fulfilling all course requirements; two students deferred for health reasons, and will complete in 2021.

In response to a mid-term review question: 'How would you rate the support to you as a student?' 100% of respondents rated it 'excellent' or 'very good'.

'In terms of support it was fantastic given that everything had to go online'.

'I felt it didn't matter any hour, any day, or over the weekend, that one of you was there if there were any problems specially around the technology or around the readings'.

'I think you are all fantastic because you were so available […] 24/7 and whether it was a Sunday or whatever and I really appreciate it that I think that was remarkable'.

d. Engagement: Knowles (1984) notes that adults are 'problem-centered in their orientation to learning' (p.48) and learn best with the facilitation of a group process (p.102). While group-work is an excellent means of solving problems extensive small group-work was not possible during online delivery. The

breakout room facility was not available on Microsoft Teams at that time. Additional apps for group interaction would require additional work from students who were already time-poor and was unrealistic. While a breakout room tool is now available on Microsoft Teams, the course team used Teams sub-channels for group engagement. Check-ins in particular enabled some small group-work.

> 'The check-ins weren't planned as part of the programme, but they proved to be very beneficial'.

> 'Small groups online make it easier to join a conversation – smaller groups allow the conversation to develop faster'.

e. Relevance: 68% of student feedback suggests that course content was of excellent or very good relevance to the student learning needs of this group. The excellent retention and completion indicate the relevance of the course. This is in keeping with Knowles' (1984) assertion 'that adults are most interested in learning things that have immediate relevance'.

f. Learning from experience: Students said the course process was an experience of 'walking a mile in our learner shoes'.

> 'A direct face-to-face course actually turned out to be an online programme and I thought that that was amazing'.

> 'We're all the generation of digital immigrants rather than digital natives – that has had an impact – we are doing the best we can really'.

> 'If we had known then what we know now about digital interaction it would all have been a lot easier'.

43%

25%

16%   16%

0%

Excellent   Very good   Good   Adequate   More required
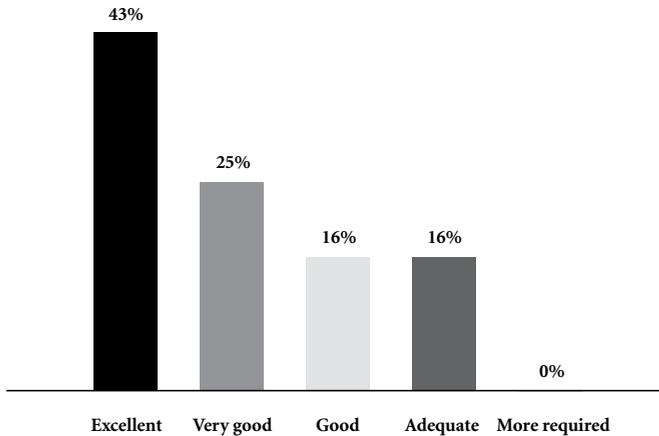
This student group learned programme design during the course, but they also learned how to learn online through this experience. We are all much more ICT proficient now than we were in March 2020, agreeing with Knowles' principle that 'adults learn better from experience'.

The request from students to 'pause' the course provided much needed breathing space and time for a more considered approach to the new situation. For the course team, the work involved in creating a fully online course was extensive and unexpected. As workloads mounted so did stress and anxiety about the quality of the course in this new format. However, the feedback cited above is confirmation that the pivot was successful and that adult education values apply in online delivery.

Virtual Learning Platforms (VLEs) for Knowledge Transfer/Sharing

Online delivery required consideration of VLEs to support course delivery. The e-moderator explored various software options. On occasion, the course team used Zoom as the bandwidth usage was more favourable than experience with Microsoft Teams, facilitating easier access by both staff and students with poor internet connection. Mentimeter and Padlet was used for feedback during the course. The course team used PowerPoint with voiceovers and videos, podcasts, and pre-recorded interviews relevant to course content. In the original course design the course team planned to use PowerPoint with voiceovers and/or video for knowledge transfer to complement in-class face-to-face interactive and dialogical interaction. Additional technologies used were helpful for dialogue

though feedback suggests they were not an authentic in-class experience. However, the check-ins, webinars and workshops worked well in the emergency circumstances.

Relationship Change

The most dramatic change in moving the course fully online was the change in relationships. In adult education courses offered by MUDACE and FESS, facilitating student groups to develop relationships with each other is a key goal. These relationships sustain students through the course and often lead to friendships that survive long after the course. In this way, groups form networks of support that could be loosely called micro-communities of practice. The possibility for building group relationships was hampered in fully online delivery but two-thirds of the course members reported forming learning groups. We know from feedback that this group developed a strong bond. The extent to which this was because they met on two occasions before the COVID-19 lockdown deserves more examination.

Conclusion

This article describes how the PGPDV course team successfully pivoted a blended learning course to full online delivery because of COVID-19. In redesigning the course to online delivery, the course team applied Knowles' (1984) principles of how adults learn to the delivery method. Throughout the delivery of the pilot course, students and the course team struggled to maintain competing priorities of work and home life within the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The article shows that the course team, in partnership with the students, were able to successfully pivot a blended learning course to online delivery by rethinking timetabling, modes of knowledge sharing and approaches to student support. While some aspects were lost, student feedback on the experience is very positive because the online design was grounded in best adult learning practice. As online learning is now mainstream, experience for online delivery and learning are an important research resource.

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Reviving and Reinstating Adult-Educators' Agency within Adult and Post-Secondary Programmes

CHRISTINE HELEN ARNOLD, CECILE BADENHORST, AND JOHN HOBEN

Abstract

In this article we reflect on the challenges we have encountered regarding our teaching and learning practices as adult educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through narrative reflections, we grapple with this rapidly changing teaching and learning environment. Our collection of adult and post-secondary programmes were designed to be delivered in an online classroom mode and traditionally have been offered with limited face-to-face interactions. Given this circumstance, we felt equipped and ready to confront the move to remote teaching. As the pandemic weeks turned into months, we found ourselves needing support from each other because of unprecedented pedagogical challenges. We asked ourselves the following fundamental question: how do we purposefully adapt our teaching and learning in a fluctuating, fluid, and stressful environment? We provide insights into our experiences and strategies, concluding that, ultimately, we turned to educator and learner agency as a foundational pedagogical tool. Analysis revealed three overarching themes embedded within educator and learner agency which included retrospective reconstruction when assessing curriculum, reciprocal anxieties when supporting personalised learning environments, and mental preparation versus provision when engaging overloaded learners.

Keywords: Post-Secondary/Tertiary Education, Learner Agency, Adult-Educators and Learners, Online Learning, Remote Learning

Introduction

The adult learning landscape is complex, evolving, and includes an ongoing tension between current critical, humanistic, and economic conceptions of learner identity and society (Regmi, 2015). Addressing occupational and social mobility needs, diversity, inclusion and equity, and providing widespread access

to programmes are challenges on their own. Adding the COVID-19 pandemic into the mix provides additional pressures. Within the Canadian context, our undergraduate post-secondary[1] programmes purposefully integrated the fields of adult and post-secondary education, which is relatively unique. The foundation is the Post-Secondary Instructors Certificate, required for all educators –professionals and practitioners –working within Newfoundland and Labrador's colleges, and across industries as instructors and trainers (hairdressing, woodworking, engineering, etc.). Additional undergraduate programmes (Diploma in Post-Secondary Education and Bachelor's Degree in Post-Secondary Education as a first and second degree) are structured around the Instructor's Certificate. For example, if learners complete the six-course Instructor's Certificate, they can add another four courses to achieve the Diploma, and with further courses, they can complete the Degrees. Adult learners have multiple pathways specifically designed for those studying at the university level for the first time and those pursuing further education.

Structurally and organisationally, our programmes were offered exclusively online prior to the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, we felt well-prepared for the shift to remote teaching. We soon realised that more nuanced concerns emerged, particularly around social and emotional access. We became apprehensive regarding our adult learners' abilities to maintain their own teaching and learning environments when many work in essential service fields, while struggling to address mental health and medical requirements and managing familial responsibilities during a time when resources are overextended.

In this study, we employ a narrative research methodology using narrative reflections we composed, shared, and analysed as we grappled with challenges encountered in our teaching and learning practices as adult-educators throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our Context

Newfoundland and Labrador, similar to Ireland, shares a colonial past, a vibrant, creative culture, and deep connections with the past by peoples who live in close connection with rugged but beautiful landscapes. Both settings have also begun to come to terms with the impact of globalisation and internationalisation and are meeting these challenges by investing in industry and infrastructure, education and training, and climate and cultural protections.

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1   In our context, we use the term 'post-secondary' rather than 'higher education' because it includes all programmes and institutions outside of the K-12 systems.

While nationally and internationally undergraduate and graduate offerings generally separate adult and post-secondary education programing, our programmes made the decision to coalesce these fields, merging formerly separate credentials and avoiding a two-tier system. Adult learning is threaded throughout the combined programmes to ensure these principles are broadly studied and appreciated (Illich, 1971). Our first programmes were established in the 1970s as a response to the need for adult and vocational/technical education instructors. Over the years, two streams of courses developed, one for adult/college educators and one for university educators. Each stream required separate credential offerings in adult learning and post-secondary education. In 2015, the programmes were restructured to combine the two streams, purposefully merging pedagogies and theoretical frameworks from both fields through interactive coursework.

Since learners commonly teach vocational/technical as well as university-level courses, our online classrooms are diverse and commonly include engineers or scientists with Doctorates, and truck drivers or hair stylists with Diplomas in the same courses. Accommodating this diversity pedagogically is both a challenge and our most impressive programing feature. Although this produces instructional dilemmas, it also promotes dialogical forms of education that allow for constructive conversations regarding the intersections between education, race, gender, and class. For example, we may have students of different ages, work experience, educational backgrounds, geographic locations, language levels, and disciplinary expertise. The diversity in our online classrooms requires careful consideration of a range of learning styles, activities, multilingualism, and issues of access. We recognise that our adult learners are situated at different points in their careers and the cement supporting this diversity is a teaching and learning philosophy based on adult learning principles, inclusion, and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Knowles, 1980; Giroux, 2007).

In 2015, the decision to move our programmes entirely online was based on access concerns within a widespread province with rural and urban impediments. This decision was controversial and many of our colleagues felt teaching and learning quality would be compromised. We embarked on a re-development of our courses, with the assistance of expert online instructional designers to address these issues. Our learners have since been studying from a multiplicity of locations nationally and internationally with information technology literacy and online instructional course design at the forefront. Consequently, we felt confident about our courses and our ability to engage adult learners in communities of practice.

Methodology

Using qualitative methods, namely narrative reflection, this case study examines our experiences as faculty members responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Adult Education and Post-Secondary Studies programmes in a Faculty of Education. Narrative reflection provides an effective means of exploring our experiences during the current pandemic. Over the past several decades, narrative methods have gained widespread acceptance as a valuable means of conducting research in the field of education (Riessman, 2008). Narrative reflection is focused on gaining knowledge and insight from the stories people tell about their own lives (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Stories allow the researcher to examine individual perspectives and experiences from the inside-out and to gain invaluable insight into the perspectives of intersectional positional and relational social identities (Lyons, 2009). Narrative reflection presupposes the importance of subjectivity and the researcher's positionality, not as a source of bias, but as a means of gaining and sharing knowledge about the world (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Creswell and Miller, 2000).

We maintained a regular programme meeting schedule throughout the Winter, Spring/Summer, and Fall 2020 semesters and the narrative reflections used in this study were the result of these continuous discussions and deliberations. We are a small unit of five within the larger Faculty of Education and the three of us, who have similar research interests, found ourselves needing increasing support from each other during the pandemic. We are a mix of tenured and untenured faculty, at various stages in our academic careers and represent several sub-disciplines (post-secondary education policy and governance, educational law, academic writing and literacies, graduate research writing, student affairs/ services, and vocational/technical education). The following fundamental question guided our investigation: *how do we purposefully adapt our teaching and learning in a fluctuating, fluid, and stressful environment?*

We analysed our narrative reflections by identifying overarching themes. A critical perspective was used throughout, which employed researcher reflexivity, collaboration, and peer debriefing (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Consensus was reached on the emerging themes and shared with all authors who acted as peer debriefers (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Emerging Themes

Our analysis revealed three overarching themes situated within our narrative reflections: 1) retrospective reconstruction was necessary when assessing

curriculum, 2) reciprocal anxieties were experienced and needed to be addressed when supporting personalised learning environments, and 3) mental preparation versus provision was worthwhile when engaging overloaded learners. Underlying these themes, we discovered, was a solid focus on educator and learner agency, which functioned communally. This integral principle influenced our collaborative decisions about our teaching and learning and communities of practice. Educator and learner agency is a fundamental concept in critical approaches to teaching and learning, which refers to an individual's ability to act within and upon his or her social environment (Emirbayer and Miche, 1998). Although critical scholars recognise the socially constructed nature of knowledge and identity, they also refuse to see the individual's actions as being entirely predetermined by those conditions. Agency demonstrates an individual's ability to share their social reality even as they recognise how social conditions shape their perception of reality and their capacity for action (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). Closely aligned with concepts like empowerment and praxis, agency allows educators and learners to translate critical consciousness into action in the world and to set the conditions for the creation of new critical insights and forms of community.

Retrospective Reconstruction when Assessing Curriculum
In teaching our curriculum during this period, we determined it was necessary to revisit and rework existing materials to ensure the relevance of activities and assignments even though our courses had been carefully designed to meet the needs of online learners. We each realised that the process of revisiting necessarily included our learners. Curriculum review during the pandemic encompassed ourselves as colleagues and learners in dialogues that we have not witnessed previously. We questioned how the curriculum was continuing to function:

> In my eyes, the curriculum is functioning as a strange hybrid of interim measures and it brings a strange new normal since we really have no idea how long this situation will last. We are developing more concrete and medium-term measures to address these challenges, and while this brings some degree of normalcy, it also conveys a lingering sense of disbelief and apprehension at what this new normal might be (Narrative Reflection, John).

We discovered that it was necessary to employ educator and learner agency as a mechanism for adjusting the curriculum. Educator and learner agency in

these moments meant raising the critical consciousness of ourselves and our learners and translating this conceptualisation into action. We recognised that the theories, models, frameworks, and case studies we generally employ when studying adult and post-secondary education sectors within our current context, necessitated more nuanced considerations. Drawing on students who were educators themselves was one way of addressing these changes. Christine described an emerging critical consciousness while analysing retention/persistence theories and models during a particular session:

> The curriculum itself has required a re-envisioning, as student retention, persistence, engagement, and time to graduate discussions that center on student development theories and models need to recognise the worries and anxieties that this situation has brought to our populations of students across campuses. Our current theories and models do not capture and reflect collective crises but rather individual crises and struggles. For example, the most widely referenced theories and models in the literature have been requiring additional thoughtfulness and include: The Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1968, 1985), The Institutional Departure Model (Tinto, 1975, 1993), The Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980, 1982), and The Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model (Pascarella, 1980), among others (Narrative Reflection, Christine).

In these sessions, institutional information surrounding campus crises responses were unable to properly inform conversations regarding what was currently unfolding, which was evidently the case in our student affairs/services courses. Instead, we brought these institutional frameworks and literature into the online classroom as sources for discussion as we constructed new understandings.

Reciprocal Anxieties when Supporting Personalised Learning Environments
An emerging awareness that has become apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic for our adult learners is their capacity to continue studying while simultaneously teaching, supervising, and mentoring their own students within their respective fields. As we amended our curriculum, our adult learners, as educators themselves, were struggling and striving for success within their own courses and materials. In these meta moments, we were provided with a common ground as we shared worries and anxieties reciprocally. Edicts from administration, continually shifting policies and procedures, increasing mental and medical health concerns, and unforeseen intersecting roles and

responsibilities, provided rich discussion areas even while it may have proved draining. John queried the exhaustion that results from engaging in these processes:

> So, what happens if on paper formal outcomes appear to be achieved but both you and learners feel exhausted and often overwhelmed? Is that an educational failure? I think it can be because it leads to inauthentic teaching if we distance ourselves from our true emotions and the lived experience that both teachers and learners remember as being the most salient part of their educational experiences […] I feel like I would be an even greater failure if I was unable to ask myself these questions or to confront this disjuncture between formal educational processes and the lived experiences of teachers and learners as they exist outside of the narrow confines of their institutional roles and the totality of their lived lives (Narrative Reflection, John).

As a result, in collaboration with our adult learners, we have been instituting unscheduled blocks where we engage in collective problem-solving and allow for discussion and debate surrounding concerns of equity, diversity, and inclusion that continued to emerge. Teaching strategies included check-in activities, storying exercises, and intentional individual and communal exchanges:

> 'Just in time' synchronous sessions have been organised in the weeks preceding each assignment deadline, so that learners can ask questions and make comments regarding the assignments as they become pertinent. For many, the sessions seem more about connecting with myself and their colleagues than the assignments and this has been refreshing. We are generally sharing our time together equally between the assignment and conversations about our personal and professional lives as educators in shifting spaces (Narrative Reflection, Christine).

Likewise, adult-educators and learners' personal characteristics and backgrounds, that were once relatively unknown have now been broadcasted in online platforms, as children are playing in the background during course sessions, unavoidable time zone differences are providing exhausted educator and learner interactions, work hours are stretching as work-life boundaries are blurred, and economic struggles are materialising with increased caseloads and closures. A relatively depersonalised curriculum has become personalised, as we recognise that ourselves and our learners require insights into one another's lives and relatable struggles in order to provide motivation:

I notice a fragility about our learners, a thinness of resilience and I find myself treading very carefully. I send emails to let them know I am here but not too many so that they become overwhelmed. I answer an increased number of emails every day, gently talking each querying learner through course materials and assignments in a way I have never done before. I post weekly videos in the online course material giving feedback on discussion posts visually rather than in written form. I know they need to see a human form. I show them my home-office and my dog in these videos, in an effort to connect. All of these examples speak to the emotional state of learners and their mental health (Narrative Reflection, Cecile).

Mental Preparation Versus Provision when Engaging Overloaded Learners
Our reflections indicated a modification that included mentally preparing students for learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. We endeavored to achieve this through developing social and emotional learning experiences and were forced to acknowledge the connections between social connectedness, emotions, and academic achievement in ways we had not expected (Turki, Jdaitawi and Sheta, 2018). Broadly explained, this is the process of socialization with regard to personal and interpersonal skills. We realised that allowing discussions around emotions were important for the two key components of social and emotional learning: self-development and social development (Reicher, 2010):

From my perspective, the temptation is always to see the curriculum as existing as a body of substantive knowledge and outcomes that exists independent of how it is enacted … but there is an emotive and relational component to the curriculum whose importance cannot be overstated and that we, as teachers, often find at the forefront of our practice. If teaching is really genuinely dialogical then the formal curriculum will inevitably change as it is enacted through dialogical teaching, active learning, and reciprocal engagement on the part of teachers and learners (Narrative Reflection, John).

Discussions of personal and broader emotional responses to the pandemic raised issues of marginalisation, privileges, and struggles. For example, lay-offs, unemployment, child-care, and other similar topics became central. While we were once more concerned with the content of our lessons, our energy is now consumed ensuring learners are mentally prepared to participate in the teaching and learning context. As Cecile explains:

There is a heightened attention that is hard to articulate and to be quite honest, the result is that I feel a sense of exhaustion I haven't felt before in my long teaching career. It's almost like I'm physically carrying 30 learners through the weeks of the semester. So, although I think my online courses and the curriculum overall has held fast during COVID-19 and has continued to meet the needs of our learners, there is a gap that we hadn't thought to cover and perhaps didn't feel the need to address before and that's the emotional state of our learners. We had talked about social and emotional learning but perhaps on a superficial level (Narrative Reflection, Cecile).

As adult-educators, we have been modelling the means by which our current social conditions need to be recognised and accounted for when taking action in our courses and communities.

Reflections and Realisations

In summarising the reflections and realisations, we recognise the tensions created by individuals experiencing a collective crisis. Although our courses were carefully developed for online learning, they had not been developed to accommodate for the conditions of a stressful pandemic and revisiting and reexamining the curriculum became important. Since our learners are educators, they were experiencing similar anxieties and exhaustion and reciprocally sharing these social and emotional events became necessary. Our learning environments became more personalised as learners required insights into one another's lives and relatable struggles in order to acquire motivation. We realised that our students felt overloaded and overextended in our current reality and we had to adapt accordingly by preparing them mentally.

We also realised that our responses to teaching and learning in the pandemic are shaped by strong beliefs in educator and learner agency. Without this foundational pedagogical tool, our engagement with students would not have allowed for modelling reconstruction and revisions to the curriculum and personalisation and preparations for learners attempting to study and work during periods of crisis. Agency is important because it is a concept that adds tangible dimensions of action to the notion of empowerment and provides focus and direction to educators' efforts to raise the critical consciousness of students and members of society (Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Klemenčič, 2017). While it may seem incongruous to have individuals respond to a collective crisis through educator and learner agency, it surprisingly provided us with a more connected and collaborative community. For us, acknowledging that ourselves and our

learners are active agents, particularly with the often imposed, helplessness created by pandemic restrictions, provided us with a means of working through exceptional circumstances.

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Evaluating the Relevance of Learner Identity for Educators and Adult Learners Post-COVID-19

SUZANNE PARKINSON, FIONA BRENNAN, SEÁN GLEASURE, AND EOGHAN LINEHAN

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed an unprecedented impact on our world. In a short period of time, it has exposed deep and entrenched inequalities between and within societies and has prompted a radical rethink of the purpose and function of education. It is clearly no longer sufficient to impart learners with mere curricular knowledge. It is imperative that learners learn 'how to learn' and understand the process of becoming and being a learner. 'Learner Identity' is an emergent construct linked to learning 'how to learn'. This paper interrogates the relevance of learner identity for educators and for adult learners in a post-COVID-19 world.

Keywords: Learner Identity, Learning 'How to Learn', 21st Century Learning, Core Competencies, Adult Learners

Introduction

An overwhelming majority of the world's enrolled learners experienced the temporary closing of educational facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Viner et al., 2020). Approximately 200 countries closed schools with over 90% of learners, ranging from early years through to higher education, facing some sort of disruption to their education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic undeniably caught education systems and learners off guard and in a short space of time exposed gaps, inequalities and limitations in developing preparedness among learners for times of pandemics and emergencies. Teacher-led learning became obsolete overnight and key questions were asked about the 'what', 'how' and 'where' of learning (Zhao, 2020). The questions arising have resonated within adult and community education contexts for some time. Must all learners follow a predetermined curriculum about which they have no voice? Can't learners

be provided with opportunities to pursue their own interests and needs? Can't learners be allowed to design their own learning? With educational systems worldwide transitioning from face-to-face teaching to online instruction, the issue of 'how' learners learn best emerged as a controversial talking point. Limitations of traditional ways of teaching, where learners are the recipients of what teachers teach exposed vulnerable, ill-equipped learners in an online world where teachers were not available to teach. Key attributes in learning were missing for students including learner agency, learner autonomy, self-regulation, responsibility and ownership of learning. The issue of 'where' learning takes place also entered the debate. In pandemic-times, learning can no longer be defined by what happens in a classroom or a homework space. Learning can take place anywhere and the need to acknowledge the multifaceted opportunities that may contribute to a learner's journey in becoming lifelong learners were debated (Zhao, 2020).

Adult and community education initiatives have long acknowledged the limitations of traditional educational systems. Embodied within the principles of adult and community education is the need to place learners at the centre of learning experiences, starting with the lived experience of the participant and locating learning in daily family and social lives. Teaching methodologies in adult and community learning programmes advocate for (DES, 2012) approaches that foster self-directed learning, critical thinking and 'learning to learn' skills. Teaching approaches are directed towards facilitating individuals to manage their own learning. Thus, many of the issues raised during the pandemic have already been debated within the context of adult and community education and indeed have also been debated throughout the first two decades of this century within the context of 21st century learning. The term '21st century learning' is widely used as an umbrella term for the proposed re-conceptualisation of the goals and purposes of education and learning in the third millennium. Education systems, now more than ever, are expected to cultivate values that will lead towards more inclusive and just societies, competent and active citizenship, and equality and equity in learning outcomes (OECD, 2018). With a view to the future, education, it is argued, must also equip learners with the capacity to transform themselves into self-directed learners, as well as 'with agency and a sense of purpose and the competencies they need to shape their own lives and contribute to the lives of others' (OECD, 2018, p. 2). The emergent goals for 21st century learning resonate closely with the goals and general principles underpinning adult and community education. Internationally, there is a noticeable shift away from content and knowledge

models in education towards competency-based models which place learner autonomy at the centre. Amongst the competencies identified, learning 'how to learn' is proposed. Claxton (2018) observes that it is extraordinary that it has taken education so long to develop a framework and language/vocabulary for effective learning. Learning 'how to learn' is particularly relevant for adult learners where confidence and efficacy in learning may be doubtful. Once learning is understood as a collection of skills, habits and attitudes that can be influenced by experience, then the idea that learning itself is learnable and capable of being boosted, offers endless possibilities.

Learning 'how to learn' extends far beyond content knowledge and academic skills and includes factors such as attention, memory, metacognition, persistence, grit, goal-setting, help-seeking, cooperation, conscientiousness, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-control, self-discipline, motivation, mindsets, effort, work, habits, organisation, learning strategies and study skills. 'Learner Identity' is an emergent construct linked to learning 'how to learn'. It is defined as the process of becoming and being a learner. It is a 'conceptual artefact' that contains, connects and enables reflection over the emotional and cognitive processes of the experience of becoming and being a learner. In essence, it is about enabling students to review themselves as learners and to foster their understanding of how their actions, emotions, thoughts and motives about themselves in learning are interconnected (Coll and Falsafi, 2010).

This paper begins by documenting the transition from traditional models of learning with a curricular focus to 21st century models of learning defined by core competencies where goals relate to lifelong learning. Proposed models of learning for the 21st century are critiqued and their relevance to adult education considered. Learning 'how to learn', a key competency for 21st century learning and related to learner identity is considered. The paper will critique learner identity, a fluid, organic construct which aspires to embrace the process of becoming a learner rather than measuring what learners become. This empowering and potentially transformative construct emphasises the need for nurturing 'the becoming and being of learners'. Such a construct challenges prevailing understandings about how individuals learn and how educational systems evaluate, measure and track progress. The impact of this new perspective on learning will be considered with particular reference to adult learners and marginalised learners who, too often, struggle with the 'what' of learning at the expense of inadequate acknowledgment of the 'who' or 'how' of learning. The paper concludes by proposing that learner identity is a timely and relevant construct for adult education.

Purpose and Function of Learning

This section of the paper considers the evolving understandings that prevail about how individuals learn. As suggested by Deakin Crick, Broadfoot and Claxton (2004), learning is a process which is undertaken by individuals and groups. In any discipline, Deakin Crick et al. (2004) contend that the process of learning results in the acquisition of knowledge or skill. As the authors suggest, this can 'take the form of the ability to do something which could not be done before, or a new understanding about the world' (p. 248). Traditionally within the field of education, learning has been regarded as a process of acquisition as opposed to a responsive process (Biesta, 2004). This view is supported by Thomas and Brown (2009) who highlight the fact that learning in the 20th century was centred on the transmission of knowledge. Similarly, Gholami (2016) writes that, in the past, curricula have emphasised the impartation of knowledge. More recently, learning has begun to be viewed as a participatory process (Thomas and Brown, 2009) whereby the learner assumes responsibility for constructing his or her own knowledge and understanding (Glaser, 1991). Over the past decades, many researchers in the field of education (Boud, 2000; Wirth and Pekins, 2008; Thomas and Brown, 2009) have argued that new types of teaching and learning are needed within education systems of the 21st century. Gholami (2016), for example, contends that instead of concentrating solely on imparting knowledge, curricula should focus on the teaching of 'how to learn'. In a similar vein, Thomas and Brown (2009) outline the need to embrace a theory of 'learning to become' (p. 321) in contrast to theories that conceptualise learning as a process of becoming *something*. Adult learners bring previous experiences and biographies of learning to new learning contexts. A theory that acknowledges the centrality of process in learning welcomes the valuable contributions of life experiences in learning, exploration and continuity in learning. Indeed, as is suggested by Carr and Claxton (2002), the core aim of education for the 21st century:

> Is not so much the transmission of particular bodies of knowledge, skill and understanding as facilitating the development of the capacity and the confidence to engage in lifelong learning (p. 9).

The European Commission (2001) proposes that lifelong learning encompasses 'all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills, and competence within a personal, civic, social, and/or employment-related perspective' (p. 9).

Critical discourse about the purpose and function of learning has contributed new understandings that identify learning to 'become' and process in learning as critical in achieving the ultimate goal of lifelong learning. It is acknowledged that traditional models of learning with a drill, practice and test focus fail many of our adult learners and in general ill prepare learners for the future. It is argued that the illiteracy skills of the future will not be the learner who cannot read, but the learner who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn (Toffler, 1970). In this, an unprecedented time of educational challenge, there is a golden opportunity to shift the focus from learning tasks and activities to the world of the learner and, hopefully, in doing so empower learners with the skills for learning for life. This vision for learners is echoed within international frameworks for 21st century learning.

21st Century Learning

In broad terms, the term '21st century learning' embodies the skills, knowledge and competencies required for academic and life success in the workplace and in general society (Ananiadou and Claro, 2009; Chalkiadaki, 2018). The knowledge society while still valuing traditional foundation skills in literacy, mathematics and manual labour, places new emphasis and increased value on higher-order cognitive abilities. Such abilities, it is argued, enable citizens to cope with change and respond to complex and non-routine problems (Levy and Murnane, 2007; Voogt 2008). The globalisation of society has also led to an increasingly multicultural and heterogeneous society in which citizens must learn to co-exist (Zajda, 2010). To overcome new complexities and avoid potential conflict, it is argued that learners must be equipped with appropriate competencies. Chalkiadaki (2018) argues that in spite of significant technological and cultural changes, education has not evolved to meet these challenges. There is, therefore, a renewed urgency within frameworks such as the 'OECD Learning Compass for 2030' (2019a) to ensure that countries are now investing in educational systems which prepare individuals for the society of the 21st century. There is a growing volume of research supporting the value of non-cognitive skills such as intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation and meta-cognitive strategies which have been correlated with academic achievement and successful outcomes after schooling (Rauber, 2008; Rosen et al., 2010; Lai and Viering, 2012). Adult and community education initiatives frequently advocate for the development of non-cognitive skills. It is arguable, however, that to operationalise outputs in this domain, there is a need to explicitly define relevant non-cognitive skills, why they matter, and how they should be nurtured in adult learning contexts. The benefits of learner-centred

forms of learning, the importance of learner voice, as well as learner agency and responsibility are also increasingly apparent in educational policy (Voogt and Roblin, 2010).

Echoing the aforementioned calls for higher-order critical thinking skills within the workforce, McGuinness (2018) and Perkins (2014) cite concerns that current educational practices at all levels lead only to superficial comprehension of topics and that learners are lacking in their abilities to cope with the unpredictable and non-straightforward problems presented to them in the workplace. Taken together, it is clear that the demands of society have and continue to evolve and, thus, there must be real changes to educational systems at all levels of learning to reflect new forms of learning and knowledge (Geisinger, 2016; Mishra and Mehta, 2017). The pause created by COVID-19 offers governments and education leaders a rare and possibly very short opportunity to review key goals in education and, perhaps with renewed vigour, to look forward, embrace change and realise the promise of 21st century learning for all learners.

Competency Based Models

To facilitate the realisation of 21st century goals in learning, a determined shift towards a competency based model in education has been observed. A core or key competency is a broad concept and encompasses skills, dispositions, attitudes and values, as well as knowledge about the context in which the competency is learned and demonstrated. A core competency is a learner's capacity to act in response to the demands of a more complex situation or task. To do so successfully, the learner needs to be appropriately informed about the task, have prior knowledge and to deploy cognitive and social skills, dispositions and values to meet the demands of the task. The concept of competency, therefore, implies more than just the acquisition of knowledge and skills. It also involves the utilisation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to meet complex demands. Such a model places learner autonomy at its centre and is motivated by three interrelated imperatives: education for democratic citizenship, education for life, and education for lifelong learning. Over the past two decades educators and international education communities have grappled to identify 21st century competencies. There is, however, no agreed international classification of key competencies. The 'OECD Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) Project' (2005) tentatively proposed three key categories of competencies: (1) Using tools interactively which involves using language, symbols, text, knowledge, information and technology interactively,

(2) Interacting in heterogeneous groups which involves relating well to others, working in teams and managing and resolving conflict and (3) Acting autonomously which involves the capacity to develop life plans, defend and assert rights, interests, limits and needs. Building on the original competencies, the OECD (2019a) proposed three further competencies to address the need for young people to be innovative, responsible and aware. These newly identified competencies are referred to as 'Transformative Competencies' and include: (1) Creating new value which involves displaying adaptability, creativity, curiosity and open-mindedness with a view to achieving a stronger, more sustainable future, (2) Reconciling tensions and dilemmas which involves learning to be system thinkers and (3) Taking responsibility which involves self-regulation, self-control, self-efficacy, responsibility and problem-solving.

McGuinness (2018), in a simplified and more accessible manner, recently proposed three key competencies necessary for 21st century education. Explaining that key competencies consist of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, McGuinness (2018) proposes that curricula should promote: cognitive competency, interpersonal competency, and intrapersonal competency. These are deemed to be key competencies because of their applicability across many knowledge domains. Cognitive competency refers to the development of cognitive skills including problem-solving, critical thinking, reasoning and decision-making. It also includes dispositions such as open-mindedness, persistence and curiosity. In terms of values, cognitive competency resonates with the desire to be stimulated, seek challenges and act with integrity. Interpersonal competency pertains to the development of socio-emotional, teamwork, listening and communication skills. With regard to dispositions, interpersonal competency involves being empathetic, assertive, responsible and respectful. Values might include the desire to be just, ethical, agreeable and trustworthy. The third key competency proposed by McGuinness (2018) for 21st century education is intrapersonal competency. This incorporates the development of personal skills, dispositions and values. These include self-awareness about learning, metacognition, self-recognition of learning strengths and weaknesses, self-regulation, persistence, autonomy, agency, self-efficacy and personal identity construction.

Competency frameworks represent a significant paradigm shift in education and a move away from implementing a knowledge-based curriculum to nurturing a skills-based curriculum that will support lifelong learning. Such a shift calls for learners to assume more responsibility for their learning and

enables them to become active agents of change (OECD, 2019a). Building on this vision, the 'Future of Education and Skills Project' was launched by the OECD in 2016 to support countries to find answers to educational imperatives:

1. What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are needed today to shape and thrive in their world in 2030? and

2. How can instructional systems develop these knowledge, skills, attitudes and values effectively? (OECD, 2018, p. 2).

The 'OECD Learning Compass 2030' emerged from the initial phase of the project and offers an evolving learning framework. It aimed to articulate goals for a shared future in a manner that could be utilised at different levels, including by individual learners, educational leaders and institutional decision makers to guide efforts in education (OECD, 2019a). Learner agency lies at the heart of the Learning Compass framework and is defined as:

> The human capability to anticipate the unknown (based on prior experiences and current competencies, skills, knowledge, values, attitudes and beliefs), to set goals, to plan their pursuit and attainment, and to accept responsibility for one's action (Taguma et al., 2018, p.23).

Learner agency is not viewed as a fixed personal construct and may evolve depending on individual maturation, social relationships and contextual factors (Taguma et al., 2018). For agency and co-agency to be achieved, it is proposed that the learner requires the acquisition of core foundations in literacy and competencies such as 'learning to be a learner'. Finally, it is hypothesised that learner agency will be achieved through a continuous cycle of 'Anticipation-Action-Reflection', i.e.:

> An iterative learning process whereby learners continuously improve their thinking and act intentionally and responsibly, moving over time towards long-term goals that contribute to collective well-being. Through planning, experience and reflection, learners deepen their understanding and widen their perspective (OECD, 2019b, p.2).

The OECD stresses that the Learning Compass is not a prescriptive framework and simply points to a shared, desirable future with a focus on individual and collective well-being. Progressive educational systems worldwide are embracing competency models. 'Learning to learn' has been introduced as a key

competency by a number of countries including Ireland in recently redeveloped curricula with a view to empowering learners, along with nurturing students' sense of agency and identity (OECD, 2019a). The pandemic has highlighted the need for education to equip learners to meet the challenges of a dynamic, unpredictable and changing environment. Within this context, implementing a framework for 'learning to learn' (L2L) across the continuum of education is paramount.

Learning to Learn as a Key Competency

L2L is identified in one of eight 'Key Competences for Lifelong Learning' by the European Commission (2018). Radovan (2019) traces the origin of L2L to the 1980s when the processes through which individuals' control, direct, and manage their learning became of interest to researchers. The focus at this time shifted from a teacher-oriented behavioural understanding of learning to a cognitive approach and centred on 'how information is processed and stored in memory' (p. 31). The European Commission (2018) describes L2L using cognitive and metacognitive terms and highlights the processing, assimilation and application of knowledge and skills as well as the organisation and management of information and time. The definition acknowledges to a lesser extent the affective and social dimensions of L2L with token attention paid to the role of motivation, confidence or persistence in overcoming obstacles, either individually or collaboratively. Contemporary authors argue the need to avoid a 'narrow identification' of L2L and call for a broader understanding acknowledging the 'who' of the learner alongside the 'how' of learning.

Narrow versus Broad Vision of L2L

Lee (2014) identifies L2L as a crucial '21st century cognitive competence' (p. 466). Radovan (2019) emphasises the inextricable link between L2L and 'the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of learning' (p.30). Cognitive learning strategies are defined as intentional mental processes implemented by an individual in pursuit of a specific learning goal involving self-regulation and control (Radovan, 2019). Typically, cognitive strategies can be categorised across three different levels of cognitive engagement involving rehearsal, elaboration and organisational strategies. Metacognitive strategies, by contrast, involve guiding or managing the learning process (Radovan, 2019) through setting goals, managing learning strategies and learning behaviours and self-monitoring strategies. These occur after the learning process and involve the evaluation of performance and identification of problems.

Pirrie and Thoutenhoofd (2013) argue for a broadening of understanding of L2L. Such a shift, it is argued, is necessary to transcend the current individualistic and task-oriented approach to L2L which sets arbitrary horizons to a learner's efforts through its predetermined educational ends (Pirrie and Thoutenhoofd, 2013). While it is evidently necessary to consider the cognitive and metacognitive 'how' of learning, its relevance is contingent upon the concurrent recognition of the unique person brought to the learning process, as well as the operating context. In this sense, L2L is not limited to the development of a toolkit of skills and strategies in pursuit of effectiveness and efficiency in learning. Rather, it must concurrently cultivate learning dispositions and attitudes. It is important too that there is an acknowledgment of prior experiences and the sociocultural context and that L2L recognises the collaborative, dialogical and experiential nature of learning. Viewed from this perspective, L2L fulfils the definition of a competency. Smith (1993) in his book *Learning How To Learn: Applied Learning Theory for Adults* offered practical guidelines for supporting learning 'how to learn' into application in adult education settings. Recommendations included self-education, group learning projects, learning through reflection and learning through intuition and dreams. L2L is more than just the acquisition of strategies and skills. It also involves the utilisation of attitudes, values, dispositions with due recognition of sociocultural context. L2L and learner identity are inextricably linked. Nurturing learner identity is among the core aspirations for 21st century education (OECD, 2019a) and is an emergent construct with key relevance to adult learners.

Learner Identity

Key perspectives on learner identity have been proposed by researchers and authors in the field of education over the last number of years. Early attempts by the Centre for Learner Identity Studies (CLIS, 2014) to conceptualise learner identity featured a broad model of the construct centred upon six bases: gender, generation, social class, place, ethnicity and spirituality/religion. This model suggested that these six bases and the socio-cultural aspects of an individual's experiences influence one's subjective experience of being a learner (CLIS, 2014). Other researchers, however, contested this preliminary model of learner identity. For example, Falsafi (2010) argued that the CLIS definition described several social identities rather than providing a definition of learner identity that was based solely on the activity of learning.

A differing perspective has been adopted by Kolb and Kolb (2009) who define one's overall identity as a learner rather than part of one's identity being that of

a learner. These authors state that 'people with a learner identity see themselves as learners, seek and engage life experiences with a learning attitude and believe in their ability to learn' (p.5). Kolb and Kolb (2009) argue that an individual's learning identity develops over time and is nurtured through positive relationships. Crick and Wilson (2005) share a similar understanding, stating that one's awareness of self and one's self-worth as an individual are necessary prerequisites for becoming a learner. Furthermore, they argue that one's sense of self as a learner is developed through relationships and recognised as the individual narrates their own story 'as a participant in the conversation of the learning community' (p.359). This understanding of learner identity is particularly relevant for adult learners. A multitude of barriers can limit learner access to, participation in and benefit from relevant programmes arising from differences in socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability. Nurturing learner identity through supportive relationships, communities of learners and space for exploration of learner narrative offers opportunities to enhance awareness of self as learner.

A sociocultural viewpoint on learning is also presented by Dewey (1910). He argues that the nature of the social environment and the quality of the learning relationships in which individuals participate influences their development as learners. Likewise, Crick and Wilson (2005) emphasise the importance of the quality of relationships in learning contexts. Stemming from the work of Rogers (1961; 1964), they regard authenticity, congruence and unconditional positive regard as pivotal qualities within learning relationships. Adult education programmes understand the importance of quality learning relationships and place emphasis not just on the individual adult learner but also on the potential benefits of positive group learning experiences which can support community cohesion, participation and collective action.

An alternative viewpoint is suggested by Coll and Falsafi (2010). They propose that learner identity:

> Is the conceptual artefact that contains, connects and enables reflection over the emotional and cognitive processes of the experience of becoming and being a learner, in the past as well as in the present and the future (p.219).

These researchers explain that students construct self-understandings based on their experiences within formal and informal educational settings. Coll and Falsafi (2010) point out that learner identity incorporates generalised meanings

about how an individual is recognised as a learner by oneself and by other people. Moreover, these authors suggest that the meanings learners formulate about their experiences are influenced by certain aspects of the learning environment. Influential factors may include the pupil's self-confidence in their own ability, opinion of the class teacher, prior knowledge in a particular area, attitudes, interests and motivation. As a result, the learning experience can be understood to assume an important role in mediating the meaning a student formulates about the learned subject, overall educational experience and oneself as a learner in different learning environments. Viewed from this perspective, it is possible that many adult learners are at risk of presenting with fragile learner identities. Early school experiences may not have been positive and many adult learners have not acquired 'learning wisdom' associated with a positive learner identity or knowing why, what, when and how to learn: in other words, being ready, willing and able to engage in the learning process. Adult learners may not have had educational opportunities to tackle and persist with challenge. They may not have had the opportunity to develop a sense of agency. Fostering a sense of agency in learners allows the learner to feel empowered and to take a leadership role in relation to their learning and development. Research has found that positive learner identities are more likely to be sustained if teachers help to position learners as the authors of their own learning trajectories.

While differing perspectives on learner identity exist, shared understandings are evident. All models of learner identity incorporate the learner's sense of him/herself as an active agent of learning and development over time. The learner's awareness of personal feelings, attitudes and processes in learning and the learner's ability to manage them are evident across all theoretical models. Importantly, viewpoints concentrate on the ongoing process of learning, of becoming and being a learner as opposed to immediate goals and achievements. All models promote learner narrative, the 'story' of the learner, and stress the importance of learner voice. As early as the 19th century, George Herbert Mead spoke of the 'self' as an important basis for understanding young people's 'definitions of the situation' in which they find themselves, and acknowledged that young people themselves actively shape the educational processes in which they are engaged. There is a common understanding among theorists about the significance of learner autonomy coupled with agency in learning and with an implicit emphasis on intrinsic motivation. The process of becoming and being a learner and the nurturing of learner identity is inherently reciprocal and the quality of learning relationships is acknowledged.

Learner identity is, therefore, a hypothetical construct like self-esteem or intelligence. It is an emergent construct, and a brief Google search will reveal a limited number of definitions emerging in very recent times. How learner identity is conceptualised, defined and what significance will be assigned to it in education will no doubt be the source of future theoretical and philosophical debates. Differing definitions will typically reflect varied theoretical perspectives. An agreed definition will need to highlight the multi-componential, inter and intrapersonal nature of learner identity as well as the role of socio-culturally-mediated processes.

From an educational perspective, it is important to be able to define learner identity and, yet, therein lies a philosophical conundrum. While on the one hand, definitions reduce fuzziness and make constructs more tangible, there is an inherent difficulty in defining learner identity. Learner identity focuses on the process of 'becoming' rather than 'becoming something' and is defined by the learner and by learner narrative. It is arguable that the essence of 'learner identity' can be defined only by the individual. Scales, tests or measures no matter how sensitively developed reflect an alternative view of an individual's learner identity and deny the individual the freedom to define it for him/herself. It is problematic and potentially invalid to design such a measure that prompts a learner to accept passive measures by others for defining their learner identity.

The authors favour a conceptualisation of learner identity as an organic construct, in constant evolution reflecting the process of 'becoming and being a learner' and composed broadly of two main dimensions that should not be separated, but rather viewed in totality. Firstly, there is the 'who' of the learner. This is the learner narrative and includes non-visible behaviours: the learner's thoughts, perceptions, values, feelings and beliefs. The 'who' of the learner includes the biography of the learner, the story of the learner, the learning journey and must always be referenced within the social-cultural context in which the learner resides. Secondly, there is the 'how' of learning. This relates to the language, skills and strategies for learning selected, customised and personalised by the learner. This understanding of learner identity mirrors previously articulated views by a myriad of theorists and also reflects the broad thrust of 21st century learning competencies. The construct of learner identity offers a fresh, new and empowering perspective to understanding learning and learners, as well as challenging prevailing understandings about how we evaluate, measure and track progress in education.

Learner Identity and its Relevance for Adult and Community Education
COVID-19 has challenged the functions and purposes of education with an immediacy and urgency unparalleled in history, obliging policymakers and educators to reconsider what values and practices underpin existing models. COVID-19 may be a short-term crisis but in the context of other potential crises looming large such as climate change, large-scale movements of populations, worldwide demographic changes, hundreds of millions of people who lack basic skills, it is critical that the educational response to this crisis is not short-term. Now, more than ever, we need to embrace a new understanding of education. The linear approach of our current educational system does not align with the dynamic and nonlinear nature of the world we live in nor with the learning needs of many of our adult learners. The capacity to respond to future challenges points to a need to nurture learner identity, to support a learning orientation for life, and enable learners to experience learning as a continuous rather than static process. With this shift to viewing learning as a dynamic and continuous process, we must also look to utilising more learner-centred instructional approaches to prepare for lifelong learning. The construct of learner identity is timely, relevant and empowering for adult learners and seeks to emphasise the nurturing of efficient, effective, self-aware, lifelong learners. To establish a learner identity, individuals must be given the opportunity to increase their autonomy, responsibility and motivation as learners, acquire the language of learning, explore dispositions/learning ways and implement effective customised learning strategies. This is a welcome perspective for learners and particularly for vulnerable learners. It places a renewed focus on the importance of learner voice, learner narratives, authenticity in assessment practices and the provision of specific vocabulary and skills for learning how to learn and the opportunity to customise and personalise learning strategies. Learner identity as an emergent construct offers an empowering perspective on learners and the learning process. It challenges current models of adult and community education to embrace autonomy-led pedagogies, teaching methodologies that emphasise authentic and sustainable assessment and learning experiences that promote opportunities to elicit learner voice and learner narrative. Learning to be a learner, a key goal for adult education, should support personalised and customised learning agendas.

Models of Learning and Teaching
It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the multiple models of learning that have emerged over recent years that focus on adult learning. Andragogic approaches (Knowles, 1970), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978),

experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), self-directed learning (Garrison, 2017), project-based learning (Dewey, 1897), and action learning (Revans, 1982) all take into account the interrelationship of many factors in the learning situation, and place the adult learner's contexts, purposes and practices at the centre (Freire, 1993).

Nurturing learner identity requires a shift in teaching models, from the teacher transferring knowledge to the learner (Freire, 1993), to an emphasis on learner autonomy, learner responsibility and learner ownership. In adult and community educational contexts that nurture learner identity, learning will be directed towards the specific individual instead of a one-size-fits all instructional model. Learners will be invited to drive learning and demonstrate the capacity that to learn is, itself, learnable. As a consequence of autonomy-led pedagogies, learners will be nurtured to be confident capable learners, ready, willing and able to choose, design, research, pursue, troubleshoot and evaluate learning for themselves, alone and with others, in education and in life.

As previously discussed, a key priority moving forward in education is the need to 'form learners who know how to learn throughout their lives' (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014, p. 275). Using appropriate learning strategies can render academic behaviours more productive and effective in improving students' performance. Disciplinary literacy approaches have been advocated as a potential instructional method for 21st century curricula (Burke and Welsch, 2018). This approach promotes the essential skills, dispositions and forms of knowledge associated with reading, writing, speaking and listening in specific academic disciplines (Moje, 2008; Shanahan and Shanahan, 2012). In a new era where learners are to be equipped with the language, skills and strategies for learning 'how to learn', it is arguable that a transdisciplinary literacy curriculum should be developed within education. To enable learner ownership, learner independence and learner responsibility in learning, learners must be introduced to the vocabulary and language associated with learning 'how to learn'. There is arguably a need for adult education to create a framework for learning 'how to learn' with a specified transdisciplinary literacy to enable learning for life.

Authentic and Sustainable Assessment
Models of assessment reflect our understanding of how learners learn. Future directions for assessment policy must be built on practices of sustainable assessment that nurture learner identity and that must in turn be evident in the assessment methods embedded within adult education if learners are to

become lifelong assessors and active participants in a learning society. When defining sustainable assessment Boud (2000) refers to assessment practices that 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs' (p.151). As noted by Boud and Falchikov (2006), sustainable assessment is not a new type of assessment; rather, it involves the further development of formative and summative assessment to promote longer-term goals. Boud (2000) coins the term 'double duty of assessment', acknowledging the fact that assessment should consider the current task and the implications for preparing learners for lifelong learning in an unpredictable future, and that it should focus on engaging learners in the learning process and ensuring that they acquire knowledge. Moreover, it is suggested that individuals must have the ability to be assessors of learning if they are to become lifelong learners (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). In other words, the assessment practices utilised by educators and learners themselves should be considered in terms of whether or not they prepare learners to assess their own learning in the future. New assessment methods and a greater balance in assessment methodologies will hopefully emerge post-COVID-19. Such assessment methods in adult learning contexts may well include the use of rubrics, scaling techniques, personal construct psychology methodologies and peer and self-assessment methodologies.

Learner Voice

As far back as 1975, Stenhouse put forward the idea that learners would perform better in education if they were treated 'with respect as learners […] and [their] ideas listened to and taken seriously' (p.32). Too often, learner voice is positioned in educational systems as 'an evaluation criterion for teachers' underscoring the 'pedagogical importance of engagement and consultation' (Fleming, 2015, p.236). Such facilitation of learner voice, serving issues of performativity, accountability and power within organisations misses the point of eliciting learner voice. Rudduck and Flutter (2004) make a noteworthy comment on the significance of learner voice in enhancing teaching and learning practices:

> Hearing what learners have to say about teaching, learning and educational environments enables teachers to look at things from the learner perspective […] [and] being able to see the familiar differently and to contemplate alternative approaches, roles and practices is the first step towards fundamental change in classrooms and schools (p.141).

Lundy (2007) identifies four conditions necessary for the meaningful use of learner voice. She proposes that learners should have a space in which they can share their views, a voice to express their opinions, and an audience to listen to their ideas. Furthermore, she states that their views should instigate a response and action. Where learner voice is incorporated meaningfully into education, it has the power to support learner agency and contribute to individuals' self-identity as learners. In the diverse adult and community learning contexts of today, giving formal space to the tracking of learner voice across the learning experience should be part of assessment records. Such practice acknowledges the 'who' of the learner and offers a glimpse into the inner world of the learner – the motivations, interests, strengths, challenges, ambitions of the learner. These are critical dimensions and aspects of the learner which facilitate meaningful connections and relationships in learning enhancing the possibilities of engagement and participation in education.

Personalised Learning

Personalised learning embraces an agenda for individual empowerment in education. It is about focusing teaching and learning on the aptitudes, interests and strengths of the adult learner. Knowing the 'who' of the learner, the strengths and weaknesses of individual learners is key. Using assessment for learning, assessment as learning, and developing new methods of assessment must be considered. Personalised learning should enable the adult learner to develop the confidence and competence to learn 'how to learn' and to accept responsibility to move forward in their own learning. Personalised learning offers choice with clear pathways through the courses undertaken. The ethos, in this personalised learning model, is focused on adult learner needs with adult learners listened to and their voice used to drive forward. Miliband (2006) rightly asserts that 'choice' and 'voice' are central to the personalisation agenda in education.

Conclusion

This paper explored the construct of learner identity and its relevance for educators and adult learners within a broader context of 21st century learning and a post-COVID-19 world. While yet lacking a universal consensus on definition, shared understandings on learner identity offer a useful and purposeful lens through which to reconceptualise adult teaching and learning. In this paper, it is argued that the purpose of education is not simply the transaction of knowledge but the construction of identities that will serve learners positively throughout their learning journey. Achieving change within

adult and community education requires a reconsideration of teacher roles that re-define best practice to implement autonomy-led pedagogies; to extend use of authentic assessment strategies; to embrace learner voice, personal narratives, biographies and stories of learning; to invite customisation of learning approaches strategies, and to introduce a 'transdisciplinary literacy' for 'learning how to learn'. The potential benefits to adult learners may only be imagined. Learner identity is an empowering and potentially transformative construct inviting alternative goals for educational systems and learners – goals that place learner voice, learner agency and learner autonomy at its core. The advent of COVID-19 has highlighted the need for embracing these alternatives.

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Online Political Education in a Time of Crisis: A Case Study of the Development of an Online Learning Community with SHESchool

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Abstract

In March 2020 the See Her Elected (SHE) programme moved its political education platform online in an initiative named SHESchool. The purpose of this case study is two-fold. Firstly, it provides an account of how an ability to adapt swiftly to the COVID-19 crisis created a successful online element to a project with a strong community education ethos. Secondly, it presents and analyses data provided by learners by utilising Salmon's five-stage model for teaching and learning online. In doing so, this paper contributes to our knowledge of the experience of online learning from both the learner's and the tutor's perspective.

Keywords: Political Education, Community Education, Adult Education, Salmon's Five-Stage Model, Intrinsic Motivation, Online Learning Environment, Lifelong Learning

Introduction

The Irish system of Local Government consists of 31 local authorities. Four of these, all centred in Ireland's capital city of Dublin, have approximately equal numbers of men and women elected councillors. Outside of Dublin the number of male councillors exceeds women by some margin. This is particularly acute in rural Ireland. For example, following the 2019 local elections, 95% of the councillors elected in the midlands county of Longford were men. In the North West county of Donegal, 89% of the councillors are men. Concern at the under-representation of women in the local authorities of the North West-Midlands region was the catalyst for the formation of the See Her Elected (SHE) programme in 2019. SHE is a joint initiative between 50:50 North West (a group who advocate for equal representation for men and women in Irish politics, particularly in the North West of Ireland) and Longford Women's Link (a social

enterprise in County Longford who work to ensure that women in Longford can fulfil their potential in a safe and equal society). The programme is funded by the Irish Government's Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. SHE is a feminist, community led rural initiative to support women into political life. With a focus on the 2024 local elections, project planning for 2020 included a strong emphasis on encouraging women in rural communities to engage in politics. We follow Ireland's Central Statistics Office's (2019) definition of rural communities as those with moderate or low urban influence.

SHE planned to connect with women in their communities with a view to building up networks of women interested in politics. Our ambition for the earlier years of the programme was to draw women into becoming increasingly knowledgeable about local politics rather than targeted candidate training for an election still four years away. We wanted to do this in a way that was creative, and would attract women with a curiosity about how politics works, but who may well shy away from formal political education. A flexible mix of workshops, classes and events were all in various stages of planning when COVID-19 required a rethink. From that rethink, the idea of SHESchool emerged as a way of providing accessible community education to women in their homes, free and online.

We have structured our paper as follows. We begin with a brief contextual summary of key points from scholarship that seek to explain the over-representation of men in local government in Ireland. We draw particular attention to those relating to self-perceived qualification differences between men and women. We then situate a mapping of the pedagogical and andragogical aspects of the SHESchool response to COVID-19 within the framework provided by Salmon (2011, 2013). Our paper takes a quantitative approach through interrogating survey data completed by SHESchool participants, supplemented by reflexive observations from the SHESchool tutor. The latter part of our paper presents our analysis and provides an early picture of participant and tutor preferences in relation to online political education, and by extension for community education.

The Need for Political Education
In May 2019 Irish local government elections were held with 1,980 candidates vying for 949 council seats in all 31 county and city councils (O'Riordáin, 2019, p.1). Of those successful, just 226 were women. This meant that an entrenched

pattern of the over-representation of men was set to continue for yet another local election cycle with the number of women county and city councillors not exceeding 24% of the total.

Scholarship addressing the under-representation of women in politics generally draws attention to demand and supply explanations (Buckley, 2020, p.350). Demand explanations seek to understand the over-representation of men by considering the demand for specific types of candidates among parties, political gatekeepers, or voters (Dahl and Nyrup, 2020, p.1). Scholarship on supply factors study reasons for gender differences in the emergence of candidates (Buckley, 2020, p.351). Taken together, a picture of a complex combination of factors emerges as a barrier blocking more women than men from entering politics (Cullen and McGing, 2019, pp.7-8). Of particular interest to SHE are supply side research findings about gender differences in how confident women and men are that they have the relevant skills and knowledge to be a viable candidate. Social psychology scholarship holds that, in general, men are more likely than women to express confidence in skills they do not possess and overconfidence in skills they do (cited in Fox and Lawless, 2014, p.505). A recent Danish study finds that even in one of Europe's most egalitarian countries, there is a substantial difference in how men and women perceive themselves as qualified for political office (Dahl and Nyrup, 2020, p.4). Danish women more often argued that they did not feel confident running as a candidate due to inexperience of politics, being bad at debating, and seeing other people as being more qualified (Dahl and Nyrup, 2020, p.16). Underpinning SHE's approach to supporting women into political life was a desire to address this research identifying gendered self-perceived weakness in political knowledge. The first two months of 2020 were devoted to planning an approach that would draw together networks of women interested in politics in a way that facilitated growing political education and engagement. The advent of COVID-19 restrictions required a rapid adaptation of ideas from a schedule of events, to full online engagement. Over 2020, SHESchool delivered online political, practical and public policy modules. In keeping with best practice in online education, our method in developing SHESchool was informed by Gilly Salmon's widely cited five-stage model of teaching and learning online, and in particular the first two steps: access and motivation, and online socialisation (Salmon, 2011; 2013).

Salmon's Five-stage Model of Teaching and Learning Online

Salmon's model (depicted in Figure 1 below) was developed in the 1990s and initially tested through Open University tutorials (Salmon, Nie and Edirisingha, 2010, p.170). The model stresses a staged immersion in an online programme, starting with initial orientation and building towards participant collaboration in learning (Hammond, 2017, p.1012).
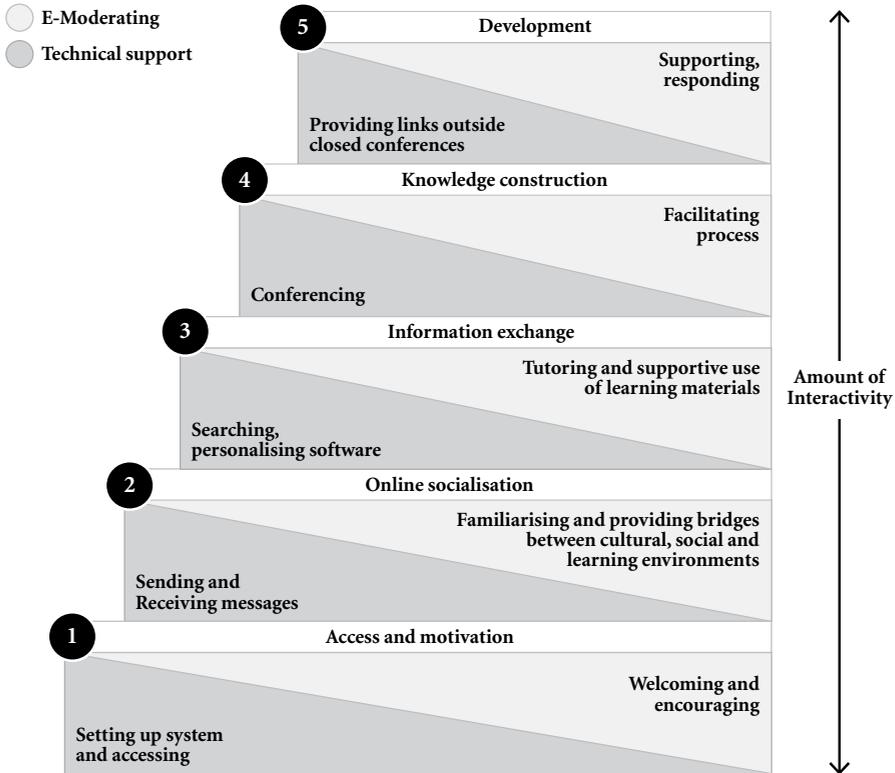
Figure 1. Salmon's Five-stage Model of Teaching and Learning Online (Salmon, 2013)

Given the relative newness of SHESchool and the programme's longer-term horizon of local elections in 2024, we concentrate on the first two stages only. Our case study draws the tutor's and participants' perspectives together, thus providing a comprehensive operationalisation of Salmon's framework.

The first stage in Salmon's framework is 'Access and Motivation'. For the learner, this involves setting up the online system, while for the tutor the focus in the first stage is on being welcoming and encouraging, and providing motivation.

Motivation can be extrinsic, such as positive reinforcement and rewards. It can also be intrinsic, where the participants are happy to take part in the activity for its own sake (Salmon, 2013, p.54). The second stage of Salmon's framework is termed 'Online Socialisation' where participants start to engage with each other, facilitated by the tutor helping participants to relate to each other.

Methodology

We initially sought to gauge the appetite for political education by presenting an Introduction to Politics module consisting of four classes. Acting on feedback, we added practical and policy modules in the second half of 2020. We have based this case study on the Introduction to Politics module alone. It has been repeated five times. Therefore, we believe it offers the best insights into operationalising Salmon's framework.

Following each set of classes, participants were asked to complete an online survey administered via Google Docs. In keeping with the principles of community education, a recognition of the need for future shaping of the programme by learners was reflected in the preparation of the survey. Participants' willingness to be part of something new and to shape its development resulted in very detailed responses. We had feedback from 55 participants, yielding a response rate of 63%. This is considered a sufficient response rate for analysis and lack of response bias (Babbie, 1998, pp. 82-3).

Our data collection was skewed towards gathering information to better inform the development of SHE. Consequently, we omitted data points that would allow the categorisation of respondents by social class and prior educational attainment. In a 2020 year-end review of SHE this omission was noted as impeding the collection of richer data, and is being addressed.

Stage One Analysis: Access, the Learning Environment, and Motivation

For 27% of respondents, SHESchool was their first time to engage with online learning. COVID-19 restrictions were cited as a reason for starting now, with an example of a typical answer being 'the lockdown gave me the time and space to do online learning where before I was always too busy'. The degree of commitment required to attend online learning was also referenced as being 'much easier'. The feedback referencing more time is not reflected in studies that speak to school closures and stay at home mandates increasing domestic labour significantly more for women than for men (Wenham, 2020). Such studies suggest that women had less, rather than more, time as a result of COVID-19.

We did not collect data such as family configurations and caring responsibilities and acknowledge the limitation of our ability to comment on the contributing factors to women in our study indicating that they had more rather than less time.

As the year progressed, we noted fewer respondents saying that SHESchool was their first online learning encounter and all of the October 2020 respondents said they had previously undertaken online learning. Where the lockdown was referenced, it was in relation to the most convenient time for classes and in terms of the timing of classes, those participating in May were split between daytime and evening time. As restrictions lifted there was a clearer preference for evening time. The ability for women outside of the envisaged North West-Midlands catchment area for SHE was evident in the geographical spread of participants to 22 out of 26 Irish counties. 73% of respondents said they would attend face-to-face SHESchool classes, if conveniently located to their homes, indicating an appetite for political education. This also lends credence to the notion of a self-perceived weakness in this area. This appetite was mirrored in the reasons given for joining. 35% confirmed that SHESchool was their first engagement with politics. The main motivation to join was cited as an interest in politics and wanting to find out more about local politics, followed by annoyance at the under-representation of women. Crucially for the SHE project, a significant cohort had joined because they were 'leaning towards' running for election, and wanting to 'get a better understanding of politics and the role of the councillor to see if I would run myself'.

Registration for the initial classes required participants to email the programme's Development Officer who was also responsible for designing the content and conduct of SHESchool and acting as tutor (e-moderator in Salmon's phraseology). While this decision was not strategic it turned out to be a key determinant in creating a welcoming and encouraging learning environment. A typical registration exchange involved four emails. The tutor responded to the initial enquiry by providing the information and inviting any questions which were answered immediately. The tone of the exchange was kept informal by the tutor. On the day of the class a Zoom link was sent to everybody who had registered. The personal and conversational nature of the registration process meant that a rapport between the tutor and the individual participants developed before the first class commenced. In contrast, where the tutor experimented by using Eventbrite to manage registration, she reported feeling that the personal connection to each participant became diluted, to the

detriment of the experience of those interacting with the programme for the first time.

As COVID-19 related restrictions unfolded over 2020, the ubiquitous nature of Zoom as a communication tool in both work and family circles meant that few if any of the participants had difficulty with access. Where access and understanding the system proved problematic, it related to the tutor missing the teaching cues from a physical classroom, making it more difficult to judge pace. Early participants highlighted that there was 'insufficient time to interact with other participants'. Their advice was to increase class time to 'incorporate more discussion time to hear from various views'; 'a chance to talk, not just listen'; and 'more time for participants to share experiences but in a timed and structured manner'. The last comment highlights a concern from a small number of respondents that while discussion is good there needs to be rules to 'ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard, not just the dominant voices'.

We acted on this feedback and found that 90 minutes works well. It allows the material to be broken up with longer break-out sessions and a short break. Since changing the format to 90 minutes, none of the feedback highlighted timing or discussion opportunities as problematic. We also invested in hardware such as a high definition camera, video lighting, a high quality headset, and a background banner to improve the overall appearance.

The tutor's informal communication style lent itself to the creation of an encouraging learning environment. When asked what was most enjoyable, the tutor was frequently mentioned. She was described as 'a very clear presenter and very easy to listen to'; someone with 'a great approach'; and how she 'made it welcoming and easy to learn'. Her 'absolute passion for the subject and her passion for enabling more women to understand it' were noted as was her 'calm and measured style of teaching, giving all sides of debates'.

There was no extrinsic motivation for participants to return to SHESchool in that they were not working towards a qualification. Yet many who attended the Introduction to Politics classes make up the majority of the attendance at SHESchool's other events such as the practical and policy modules. We posit that this is attributable to intrinsic motivation, as evidenced by participants continuing to take part in SHESchool activities. Challenging Salmon's assertion that it is unlikely that participants other than very experienced e-learners will exhibit high levels of intrinsic motivation at stage one (2013, p.54), our data

argues to the contrary. As well as repeat participation, the feedback urged SHESchool to 'keep going', with commentary such as 'I can't wait for what's next'. We link the intrinsic motivation for participation in SHESchool to Stage Two online socialisation outcomes.

Stage Two Analysis: Online Socialisation

The second stage of Salmon's framework 'involves participants establishing their online identities and finding others with whom to interact' (2013, p.45). Our data shows that this was achieved, even in the first set of classes where most of the critique around timing emerged. Partly, this was led by the tutor through employing the break-out room function of Zoom to initiate group conversations within the formal class time. However, in each of the five sets of classes, a practice emerged by the second class whereby approximately 50% of the participants stayed online for a further 20-30 minutes of conversation. This practice was participant driven, rather than being an intentional part of the learning design. The tutor remained on the call but was peripheral and acted to ensure everyone who wanted to say something had the opportunity to do so. It is this participant-led outcome that has most contributed to the intrinsic motivation for continuing engagement with the SHE programme.

Successful navigation of stage two of Salmon's framework requires the tutor to provide a bridge between cultural, social and learning environments by creating an environment where participants can relate to each other (Salmon, 2013, p.56). SHESchool sought to achieve a balance between being a relaxed introduction to politics and delivering knowledge to a strong academic standard. A deliberate decision to ensure a conversational teaching style meant that although the material was largely scholarly in nature, no respondent indicated that it was too advanced. Instead, observations noted that we were 'always treated as a group of intelligent women'; were 'pleasantly surprised at the depth of learning involved'; and that they received 'a practical (female) perspective on the reality of councillor roles and the challenges they present'. One respondent captured what SHESchool set out to achieve by saying that 'the course went very in depth into how government actually works which was extremely useful and made it seem a little less intimidating'.

The opportunity for participants to discuss the material among themselves was a strong theme in our data. Discussions were described as providing 'food for thought'; an opportunity to 'hear other people's views'; and 'hearing contributions from women with valuable experience'. Respondents spoke of

enjoying 'being part of a group of women with similar interests'; 'chatting to the other women afterwards'; 'getting together with other women with a similar aim'; and 'a welcoming atmosphere to discuss topics'. Participants were keen to think of ways that the online experience could match face-to-face interactions as closely as possible and there were consistent references to being able to meet up 'in real life' once COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

Conclusion

SHESchool emerged as a response to COVID-19 restrictions and has become a successful component of the SHE Programme. An analysis of participant data conducted within Salmon's five-stage model for teaching and learning online provides insight into the factors that enhance and detract from the online learning experience. Stage one focuses on access and a welcoming learning environment. Being able to forge a personal connection with participants through an email registration process was conducive to building rapport, although less efficient in terms of time than an automated application. A tutor with the ability to blend scholarly material with an informal style of teaching creates an intrinsic motivational momentum towards the relationship building aspects of the second stage of Salmon's framework. From the participant's perspective, the access element to online learning was unproblematic. What was of a key concern to them was a lack of opportunity to hear from each other. The positive learning environment created under stage one of the framework was significant as it allowed the participants to take the lead to address this concern. Their feedback prompted the tutor to amend the design of SHESchool events to more readily employ the break out room and polling functions of Zoom. More importantly, they also took the initiative to extend their time together by staying online after class to further explore class material that was of interest to them. SHESchool participants are well placed to remain connected both online, and face to face in a post-COVID-19 environment as a community of women seeking change in political representation.

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Storm on the Island – The Lived Experience of Working-Class Adult Learners in Higher Education

NEIL M SPEIRS

Abstract

This paper draws on both a theoretical understanding and a semi-autoethnographic approach of the lived experience of working class adult learners in higher education during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In particular, the paper warns of the doxic notion of current working class struggles being singularly attributed to COVID-19. Rather it is vital to assert that the societal structures that frame and reproduce inequality – written by the dominant classes and cultures – are the root of the problem. The daily struggles of working class adult learners have been amplified by the pandemic, but through Freire's love as a political force, there is space for radical hope.

Keywords: Working-Class, Adult Learner, Digital Exclusion, Loneliness, Inequality

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in 'significant psychological and social effects on the population' (Saladino et al., 2020, p.1), through a 'prolonged exposure to stress' (ibid.). However, these effects are not experienced equally throughout society, we are reminded that 'the great public health lesson is that for centuries pandemics disproportionately affect the poor and disadvantaged' (Abrams et al., 2020, p.660). Because of the structures that frame and reproduce inequity, we find that 'historically disadvantaged communities have reduced capacity to adopt preventive measures' (Thakur et al., 2020, p.945). Since the beginning of this pandemic the dominant classes and cultures of society have been enlightened on various matters related to social class and race. For example, access to information technology, the value of free school meals, the isolation and loneliness of the elderly and systemic racism. For a while, many

stood with the oppressed and forgotten – as these matters made the headlines in TV news programmes and were found in editorial articles in various papers across the world. However, I would posit that the interim solidarity and allyship that was shown is beginning to wane. It is pertinent here, to be reminded of Paulo Freire's true solidarity; Kester et al. (2010, p.501) outlines that '[w]hen Freire talks about true solidarity with the oppressed, he clearly distinguishes between pious gestures, or false generosity, and an act of love'. It is this genuine and gentle act of love – that is at the core of authentic solidarity and allyship – that is required to free the oppressed.

The devastation caused by the storm of COVID-19 has been reported upon extensively – and rightly so. However, the impact that it has had upon the working class has yet to be properly elucidated. There have always been struggles for families during school holidays to provide lunch; digital poverty is not new; many elderly living in state pension poverty live with loneliness and isolation every day and ethnic and racial minority community groups were uncomfortably familiar with experiencing racism long before COVID-19. The lived experience of the working class during COVID-19 cannot be uniquely tracked, traced and singularly attributed to COVID-19. What the pandemic has done is massively amplify the daily struggles of the working class. Struggles, which are the result of societal structures that frame and reproduce inequity. These structures existed long before COVID-19 and will continue to exist until we see the true necessary conditions for emancipatory dialogue to free the oppressed. Paulo Freire wrote about these conditions; profound love, humility, faith, trust, hope and critical thinking – with these, all can be renewed, after all 'I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative' (Freire, 1992, p.8).

Context

This paper will focus on the lived experience of working class adult learners in higher education during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Charles Umney (2018, p.33) reminds us that 'thinking about class should not be purely about classification, however nuanced'. The author goes on to state that 'for Marx class is more about the position and function that people occupy within the structure of an economy, and the way in which these different roles interact and conflict'. A modern interpretation of social class can be found in Mike Savage's book (2015) that considers its place in the 21st Century. It goes beyond the Registrar General's Social Class Scale to introduce seven social classes – perhaps illustrating the nuance that Umney refers to. However, it is important to remember – amongst

the sophisticated granularity – that '[a]lthough often conflated with one another, social class and socio-economic status can be distinguished as separate constructs' (Rubin et al., 2014, p.196). It is this work by Rubin that I will draw from. In the sense that 'social class refers to one's sociocultural background and is more stable, typically remaining static across generations' (ibid). This is in contrast to socio-economic status which 'refers to one's current social and economic situation, and consequently, it is relatively mutable' (ibid). In citing Owen Jones, Diane Reay (2017, p.6) astutely points out, 'it may be confusing to make sense of the changes in working-class composition from the working class of mines, steelworks and factories to one of supermarkets, call centres and offices'. However, as Reay (ibid) rightly asserts, 'thinking through class is still vital because it makes us confront the issue of who has wealth and power. It also focuses our attention on which stories and versions of the social world are listened to, and encourages us to ask why'.

In focusing on the lived experience of working class adult learners in higher education during the COVID-19 global pandemic, I will draw on a blend of narrative research and a rich conceptual framework from the literature. Specifically within narrative research, I will employ a semi-autoethnographic approach (Wall, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011; Bochner et al., 2016 and Adams et al., 2017). As Ellis et al. (2011, p.273) write, autoethnography 'challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others' and is methodologically situated to challenge the structures that frame and reproduce the inequalities that working class adult learners navigate. The authors (ibid) continue to note that autoethnography 'treats research as a political, socially just and socially conscious act'. This aligns with the aim of this paper, in that it is an act of solidarity. An act that, in a socially conscious manner, illuminates the inequitable lived experiences of adult learners in higher education. At the heart of autoethnography is 'meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience' (Ellis et al., 2011, p.274). This approach 'accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research' (ibid). However, it is vital that the personal experience is the subject of systematic analysis, in part achieved by 'comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research' (Ellis et al., 2011, p.276). This analysis facilitates a wider socio-political understanding of cultural experiences. Therefore, in this paper, I will draw on my professional experiences and observations related to working class adult learners. These will be described and analysed through conceptual frameworks from the literature. In particular, and of the greatest concern over the last few months, are circumstances related to digital exclusion,

single parent students and loneliness. Throughout the paper, Seamus Heaney's poem 'Storm on the Island' will be used as an allegorical tool to further explain, describe and understand the lived experience of working class adult learners in higher education.

Our Island

Seamus Heaney's poem 'Storm on the Island' (Heaney, 1991, p.38) is a powerful source to use in an allegorical manner to describe and explain the lived experiences of working class adult learners in higher education during COVID-19. The poem is the monologue of a villager who lives on the titular island; they lament over their concerns of the storms that batter their community and the resultant effects. We can firstly consider social isolation and the constant preparedness for what might go wrong; 'we are prepared: we build our houses squat'. There is a sense of the inevitability that something might go wrong for the islanders, the storm will come, but their houses were built to minimise damage. In this way, I recall the many working class adult learners who speak to me of consistently being ready to be found out, something was going to go wrong. Diane Reay (2001, p.334) reminds us that 'within the educational system all the authority remains vested in the middle classes', and that '[i]t is not surprising then that education for the working classes has traditionally been about failure; about being found out'. Those that have not experienced the anxiety associated with the inevitable storm that is coming, must be reminded that 'working-class relationships to education cannot be understood in isolation from middle-class subjectivities' (ibid., p.333). Indeed, for the working class adult learner 'finding yourself within education, no less than losing yourself, is a problematic enterprise' (ibid., p.343). That is because for the adult learner, the risk of being found out may indeed be the price to pay for finding yourself.

We can turn to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977/2000, p.210) in order to begin to understand why the working class adult learner is consistently anxious about failure and being found out. They note that privilege confers 'on the privileged, the supreme privilege of not seeing themselves as privileged' which then means it is easier to 'convince the disinherited that they owe their scholastic and social destiny to their lack of gifts or merits'. Meaning that 'less powerful social groups are seen as 'deserving' their inferior positions' (Archer et al., 2018, p.130). This notion of lack of scholastic gifts fits with how the discussion concerning the role of adult learners in higher education tends 'to stress their alleged needs rather than the potential benefits that they can bring' (Richardson, 1994a, p.373).

The historically unsatisfactory relationship with higher education that working class adult learners have, mirrors the relationship between the island and its islanders – one of historical uncertainty and danger, something will go wrong. This hyper-vigilance for the onset of various threats is seen in the developing barren landscape of the island, 'nor are there trees, which might prove company'. The anxiety associated with what will inevitably come, has led to the islanders deciding not to fill their land with trees – to reject all that could bring comfort, 'you know what I mean – leaves and branches can raise a tragic chorus in a gale'. There are no Ginkgo Biloba or Acer Palmatum for summer shade and dazzling autumnal colours – because they could cause trouble. This is related to the risk that many working class adult learners need to navigate. Because of studiously navigating the risk of higher education, they may be singularly focussed on achieving their degree outcome, but at a cost where there is no time or space for the shade and beauty of an extended landscape. No space for the extra and co-curriculum, the broader student experience. The circumstances that the adult learner experiences can lead to limited networking opportunities and the chance to develop new friendships. Heaney writes 'You might think that the sea is company // but no'. We may well think of the full socialisation and intellectual integration of students being vital, but it can be seen as a risk, it may not bring company.

Just as the islanders are prevented from fully experiencing the beauty of life on the island, so too the working class adult learner finds barriers to participating fully in higher education (Davies et al., 2001; Tones et al., 2009; Fragoso et al., 2013; Kearns, 2017; Baglow et al., 2019 and Saddler et al., 2020). These barriers to participation were discussed by Ekstrom (1972) almost 40 years ago, but still ring true today. The author refers to institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers experienced by women when considering access to higher education – but the themes that Ekstrom writes about share many similarities with the experiences of all working class adult learners in higher education. In terms of institutional barriers, we might consider the admission practices of universities, including their lack of familiarity with entry qualifications that working class adults may apply with. We might also consider institutional barriers in a broader sense as being the compounded result of institutional habitus. For example, the institutional refusal to see that the transition of the adult learner to degree level study is not simply a process of the student going through change but also the institution. We might think of situational barriers as those arising from obligations and personal circumstances. Indeed, these obligations and personal circumstances can sometimes result in the need to take interruption

of studies or on other occasions discontinuing studies. I would posit that it is often the case that institutions wrongly assume that discontinuation is simply a matter of dispositional outcomes. Richardson (1994a, p.375) wrote of the need to attribute discontinuation as related to 'non-academic reasons (such as ill health)' rather than the assumptive notion that it was a matter of academic failure. When observing working class adult learner disruption of studies or discontinuation, it is vital that an ecological approach is employed. One that not only considers the dispositions of the individual but also the environment or context in which they function. Otherwise, institutions are divorced from the pastoral and wellbeing responsibilities they have. Finally, we have dispositional barriers, which can be considered as those related to person specific characteristics. This may include imposter syndrome (Clance et al., 1978), or as discussed previously the fear of being found out or of failure. However, these are not simply dispositional circumstances, these are class related and therefor the result of societal structures that frame and reproduce them. Indeed, those institutional barriers that are a result of its own habitus have the power to generate the resultant dispositional circumstances that we observe.

The many barriers and challenges that the working class adult learner must address and navigate can lead to the desire to focus on one thing at a time – otherwise the student may simply be overwhelmed and exhausted. In a sense we see that while the various storms that come year upon year – and those of a particular severity like COVID-19 – beat down upon the islanders and the working class adult learner, they may all 'just sit tight while wind dives and strafes invisibly'. The natural hazards that Heaney writes about, along with the hazards that are a result of the inequitable structures of society, spread fear – a fear that demands that we stay still until it has passed us by. Until that happens, all must 'listen to the thing you fear'. How do the islanders and the working class adult learner see this fear or threat? To answer this, I am reminded of the latent anxiety in the concept of Bauman's liquid modernity (2012). In particular, when the author notes his 'growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty' (ibid., Foreword), I am very conscious of when Heaney writes; 'Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear'. Bauman (2007, p.26) notes that 'fear is arguably the most sinister of the demons nesting in the open societies of our time'. Heaney writes of the 'huge nothing' that is feared, it appears to be undefined, shapeless, yet at any moment it can tap us on the shoulder. As Bauman (2006, p.2) writes 'fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear'. He continues '[f]ear is the name we give to our uncertainty: to our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be

done'. The islanders and working class adult learners alike wait for storm after storm to rush over them – protected by the minimal resources made available. Using these resources, we must work in solidarity with them, to find the tools to destroy this fear. As Bauman (2007, p.26) writes, 'the demon of fear won't be exorcised until we find (or more precisely construct) such tools'.

I Feel Isolated and Lonely

Pick any university that you want and walk through the various student spaces at lunchtime and you will find many enjoying the company of new friends and old. The sharing of laughter and the serious discussions surrounding the latest topic from this week's series of lectures. You will also find many that sit alone, through choice, of course, as they lose themselves in a textbook or their smartphone while devouring a sandwich and coffee. Look again and you will find others that sit alone – but not through choice. Quite a different reality to that found in the marketing dream of the various prospectuses that universities publish. Over many years, my own observations and reflections have resulted in the conclusion that working class adult learners are disproportionally represented in the group of students that spend lunchtime alone. I recall on a number of occasions students telling me that while having lunch alone in a corner of the student union building, they were asked to leave – mistaken for a member of the public and not a matriculated student. I am always left with an immense sense of disappointment and lost opportunities at these stories. Certainly not in the romantic melancholic tradition of Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', but rather in a tone aligned with Thomas Hardy (1932, p.131-132) when he wrote, 'They count as quite forgot; They are as men who have existed not'. Indeed, it is within this paper that I want to reveal those, 'Whose story no one knows' (ibid.) during COVID-19 and beyond.

Working class adult learners, as we will discuss, have the burden of navigating identity, digital inequality and striking a balance between being a good parent and a good student. This is the normal working week for the adult learner, but the added stresses and anxieties felt during this global pandemic – one day to be taught in social history classes of the future – amplify these to levels not seen before. It is no wonder that adult learners might feel that they do not belong to higher education, begin to feel isolated and then lonely. Christie et al. (2008, p.576) reported that adult learners did not view themselves as 'full members of the university community'. This is related to the social integration of students, which 'plays an important role in students' participation and successful completion of university and is partly about the development of identity as a

student' (Mallman et al., 2017, p.517). In research carried out by Ostrove et al. (2007, p.364), the authors assert that 'real or imagined experiences of social rejection induced negative emotional states […] remediated by experiences of social acceptance'. The same study noted that social class very much defines who belongs at what kind of university, this notion is also expressed by an interviewee in the study by Read et al. (2003, p.267), when they say 'I had these dreams above my station'.

When Mallman et al. (2017, p.517) write about the adult learner feeling that they 'were the odd-one-out, and have difficulty finding a place to belong socially at university', we are probably reminded of numerous examples of this in our own institutions. The authors (ibid., p.518) talk about how adult learners experience 'anxiety about their inability to feel belonging' and that their 'experience of social life within the university is minimal'. It is difficult to read this and not feel a profound sense of solidarity and compassion towards the students. To feel that – when one of the interviewees (ibid., p.519) states 'I tend to sit somewhere in the middle of the room and always alone' – that this journey of the self is not the one of the neoliberal ascent to personal improvement and achievement, but one of loneliness. Loneliness because of the great struggle that societal structures and institutional policies produce in working class adult learners. As Tett (2004, p.256) points out, 'those who do make their way into higher education do so on the basis that they are potentially able to take advantage of the benefits it can offer, but not as owners of it'. This lack of ownership of the experience is often related to student administration and organisational structures. These structures dictate, for example, timetabling and support service opening hours – very often based on the unhelpful assumption that 'students are full time, live on or near the campus, do not need to work during term time, have no responsibilities for dependants and will not need study support and advice' (ibid., p.259). After all that is placed upon our working class adult learners, to burden them unnecessarily, they must find space to stop and rest. In doing so – in those moments away from the rush of getting by and not being found out – they may awake to an isolation and loneliness. As W.B. Yeats (Finneran, 1997, p.570) wrote, 'Lonely the sea-bird lies at her rest'.

Despite the circumstances that adult learners have to navigate, I have always been aware of a strong sense of personal identity and a structure of values that appear to guide and inform. One such study by Bhatti (2003) describes how for working class adult learners at the heart of their aspirations lies a desire to make a difference to others, to 'pay something back' (ibid., p.71). One interviewee

from the study says, 'I know that now after graduating I can work in many areas and help people' (ibid., p.72). Another interviewee echoes this desire, or need to care for others and pay something back when they say, '[n]ow I work with those who are at risk. I know exactly where they are coming from. I am so happy I got a chance to get to university – late in life though it was' (ibid., p.69). These are very much generous community focussed values; they display the authenticity that Diane Reay (2002, p.403) refers to in her study of working class adult learners. In that study, Reay talks of how working class adult learners 'negotiate a difficult balance between investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self that retained an anchor in what had gone before'. Where the notion of authenticity could be described as 'being able to hold onto a self, rooted in a working-class past' (ibid., p.404). However, when considering upward social mobility, Reay cites Bourdieu (1993, p.510) and how 'the feelings of being torn that come from experiencing success as failure, or, better still, as transgression'. The students in Reay's study (p.402) refer to the 'almost magical transformative powers of education', but do have to 'negotiate tensions between maintaining a sense of authenticity and desires to fit in' (ibid., p.404). The deep concern is that 'contemporary political and academic discourses increasingly represent working-class existence as preventing self-realisation' (ibid., p.404). Because of this, the upward social mobility that the students in Reay's study engage with, result in 'individualist and solidarist fractions of the working-classes' (ibid., p.409). However, the majority of the students in the study and indeed from years of my own professional experience, do not engage in a neoliberal project of individual self-improvement. Rather, they take part in projects of the self, that can be 'aligned with strong sense of community commitment and a desire to give back' (ibid., p.409).

We can see clearly the ways in which isolation, because of social exclusion, can hurt and take students far away from a sense of belonging. As Mallman et al. (2017, p.512) report, 'mature age students' experiences of social isolation pose a significant barrier to full participation, negatively impacting their identities as students and their university transition'. Simply put (ibid.) 'mature-age students feel out of the loop and alienated from university culture'. The lunchtime rush is hushed, as students and staff retreat from the various social spaces on campus – back to offices, lecture halls and favourite seats in the library. Normally in numbers of two, three, four and five. Often, if I listen carefully, I will hear the remaining echoes of the inwards sighs of many a working class adult learner. Perhaps best summarised by the interviewees in O'Boyle's study from 2014, 'I would have felt like a bit of a fraud for the first two years' (ibid., p.185). And

again one student laments, 'I suppose when we're not in college, we're off doing different things […] the opportunity to meet up, I mean it's probably impossible' (ibid., p.184). The desire for genuine mature friendships of value and substance is clear if unrealised, 'I don't make friends very quickly, and if I make friends I want them to last. You know, I wouldn't make fast friends, that's a waste of time' (ibid., p.183). The sense of not fitting in, is far from new – as one interviewee (Mallman et al., 2017, p.520) wryly notes, 'I am instantly divided from the class as all I can think of is my failed marriage mixed with the fact I have a sensible layering of clothes'. During this global health emergency, any chance of reaching out and being a part of a learning community has been even further diminished, leaving working class adult learners even more isolated and alone.

Wheels within Wheels

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there have been many reports on digital poverty and exclusion (Holmes et al., 2020; Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2020; Coughlan, 2020; Kelly, 2020, London Irish Centre, 2020; Robinson, 2020; Irish Times, 2020). However, while digital inequalities have been intensified during COVID-19, these inequalities pre-date the pandemic. Digital inequalities are an example of the many inequalities that have been observed by wider society during the pandemic – with varying responses. The need for the world's population to change how it worked, learned and interacted socially was something that nobody could have envisioned prior to the first national lockdowns worldwide. The results of these changes – which were implemented to keep us safe – saw us do our weekly shopping online, school pupils entered virtual classrooms and colleges and universities moved quickly to deliver learning and teaching via various online platforms. The need to engage with these platforms and portals, has clearly underlined that when it comes to accessing the digital world there are those who can and those who cannot. For as long as the digital world has existed, there has always been those that cannot access it. This was particularly evident during the bottleneck rush that was the public moving to live online, where we saw parts of our community unable to engage with their learning or order their weekly shopping. Robinson et al. (2015, p.570) wrote that 'digital inequality deserves a place alongside more traditional forms of inequality in the twenty-first century pantheon of inequalities'. In her recent book, Jen Schradie (2019, p.28) wrote how 'the internet had not erased the stark inequalities between working-class and middle/upper-class groups'. In fact, 'the internet was actually making those inequalities wider, threatening to throw a wet blanket on this digital triumphalism' (ibid.). Robinson et al. (2015, p.570) remind us of the various levels of digital inequality. There can be those

members of the community that simply do not use the internet at all and those that have low-level skills and participation rates online. The authors assert that 'as the internet is ever more seamlessly integrated in everyday routines, forms of disadvantage themselves mutate'. We do not have a straightforward dichotomy of digital divide – those that have next generation computing equipment and higher order skills and on the other side, those that do not. Essentially, we can see that the 'processes of accumulation and transmission of assets, including technical assets' (Halford et al., 2010, p.938) are classed processes. We must acknowledge the nuances of digital inequality, perhaps 'a refined approach to digital inequality recognises that people's socioeconomic status influences the ways in which they have access to and use the internet' (Hargittai, 2008, p.939). Indeed, as van Deursen et al. (2019, p.2) note, 'although popular media particularly stress techno-utopian promises, ability to realize the potential benefits depends in part on the knowledge, skills, and informed use of individuals'.

Looking for a deeper understanding of digital inequity leads us to think beyond whether or not an individual or community has access to technological hardware. Ignatow et al. (2017, p.954) note that 'disparities in the level of internet skills originate in inequalities of access, but are mediated by orientations that can only be understood in relation to total life contexts'. In Robinson's (2009) study, it is noted how engaging with all forms of modern digital technologies eventually becomes habitualised – and that this is a classed process. The author (ibid.) draws on Pierre Bourdieu's work when they talk of the long-term engagement with information technologies through serious play, where the middle classes are distinguished from the working class. The serious play that the middle classes engage with results in high order skills related to modern information and digital technologies along with low computer anxieties. This is in contrast to the 'task-oriented information habitus' or 'taste for the necessary' that Ignatow et al. (2017, p.954) discuss with reference to young working class individuals. The authors (ibid., p.954) summarise that the 'enactment of a taste for the necessary is ultimately counterproductive and reinforces disadvantage' (ibid., p.954). As a result, we have the middle classes with greater access to modern technology and a sense of serious play, which leads to the development of higher order digital skills. This is contrasted with the working class student that grows up with less opportunity to access digital technologies – even if they do secure access, their interactions with technology are based on task related outcomes.

Some two decades of working with working class adult learners has certainly allowed me to develop an understanding of their relationship with technology. It can be a difficult relationship, fraught with a constant sense of trying to catch up – always feeling that you are behind, everyone else is doing and coping so much better that you. The ever-present notion of being found out. During this pandemic, universities and colleges have sought to provide those students that did not have the required technology with access to all kinds of long and short-term hardware options. This was indeed laudable and just – it dealt with the immediacy of lacking hardware and the anxiety and panic that many felt prior to matriculation. However, during the academic year the working class adult learner has been frantically trying to develop high order digital skills, minimise computer anxiety and engage in a productive relationship with technology. Our deeper understanding of digital inequity – the habitulised and classed engagement with technology – must be channelled via the support of staff on and off campus. Providing a non-assessed space for working class adult learners to engage in serious play is immensely valuable and an important pedagogical approach. It does take time and resources, but if we seriously want to facilitate the development of working class adult learners then we need to be serious about this. Digital inequity was not born of COVID-19; it existed long before the arrival of the global pandemic. As so much of what we do in life has moved to the online world, we can see how the normalised levels of digital exclusion have been magnified and intensified. However, why have we moved to a space that is so inherently inequitable – one that we know is inequitable? By moving everything online, we chose to take an action that has the outcome of exacerbating the exclusion that many working class adult learners already feel, why did we do this?

My own reflections on this are very much informed by the notion that 'the hegemonic control of technology by capitalism has played a major role in increasing the disparity between the haves and the have-nots' (Veak, 2000, p.233). In referring to work on the philosophy of technology by Feenberg (1999), Veak (ibid., p.226) reminds us that our technological futures are not neutral, '[t]echnological design is inherently political. Consequently, the observed constraint on design choice is not some "essence" of technology but can be explained by the hegemonic control of the design process by privileged actors'. Feenberg (ibid.) posits that the hegemony can be disrupted through what he terms 'democratic rationalisation'. In the words of Veak (ibid., p.226), this democratic movement will 'thwart this hegemony and open up space to reshape of modernity from within'. Our society is moulded by technology and

our technologies are shaped by society (Brey, 2003, p.54). Just as the structures of society are written by dominant classes and cultures, so too is our technology – 'technology cannot be separated from a cultural context' (Veak, ibid., p.228). As a result, we cannot be surprised when working class adult learners are excluded from the technological world – it has been written this way. As Veak (ibis., p.233) surmises, '[o]bviously, technology must be questioned, but more important, the fuel that drives the train of technology –capitalism –must be questioned'.

You Can't Ever Win

As Lovell et al. (2020, p.298) points out '[s]ingle-parent students are predominantly female'. However, it is important to note that 'the situation of women in a traditional college setting is different from student mothers' (Burkart et al., 1987, p.262). During the current period of COVID-19, students who are also single mothers have the accumulative effects of class, age and gender weighing down upon them in addition to the stress, strains and complexity of dealing with a global pandemic. Through my own pastoral work, I have been particularly aware of the chronic situations that many students, who are also single mothers, have had to face. Many of these circumstances have unequally burdened them compared with the general student population. Moreover, these circumstances are too often the result of bewildering and unnecessary structural procedures within universities. Be these concerning support with information technology, pastoral care during transition to first year or early payment of bursaries – administrative procedures seem to work against prevailing common sense and compassion. This is of course a result of the immovable institutional habitus and its domination of all those who live under it – least we not forget that these administrative procedures are designed and implemented by university policy makers. We are unlikely to be surprised that Lindsay et al. (2018, p.190) tell us that 'student parents believed that campus policies were created with the traditional student in mind'. Moreau et al. (2015, p.219) sum things up rather well; 'the dominant, default image of the student in the physical and policy spaces of higher education remains those of the carefree, with websites often populated by the presence of young, smiling and (presumably) unencumbered women'.

There are deeper gendered issue here that need to be addressed, Yakaboski (2010, p.475) notes that the 'acknowledgement that students are also mothers alters higher education's culture of historical male dominance'. The author continues when they remind us that 'single mothers experience negative

stereotypes as they negotiate postsecondary institutions' (ibid., p.465). The higher education landscape for working class single mothers to traverse is not a welcoming one. Moreau et al. (2015, p.225) are clear when they assert that working class students who are also single mothers are 'not fitting with the culturally prevalent construction of motherhood, nor with the default image of the childfree student fully available for their studies'. In the same study (p.222) the authors outline the worrying notion that 'the male partners of student mothers continued to expect that they keep the main responsibility for domestic duties' while at the same time they find that 'the female partners of student fathers were more likely to adjust their lives to accommodate their partners' needs'. With institutional habitus pushing against single mothers as students (or at least refusing to actively facilitate the notion), we also see the possibility of the partners of these students pushing against them at home. Ultimately 'women's other commitments are acceptable as long as they do not compromise their role as the main carer' (ibid., p.222).

With these perpetual storms, it is no wonder that Shenoy et al. (2016, p.152) report that 'single-parenting students face a higher prevalence of mental health stressors' than other higher education students. While, according to Moreau et al. (2015, p.225), individuals 'often established a link with their experience as a student parent' and physical and mental illness. These stress related health issues can result in a sense of anger, upset and disrupted sleeping patterns – as described by Lovell et al. (2020). The authors (ibid., p.300) point out that for many working class single mothers 'there's just not enough time in the day to get everything you need to get done'. As a result, we are not surprised to learn that 'finances, family, and relationship difficulties disproportionally affected single parents' (Shenoy et al., 2016, p.152). In 1987, an interviewee in a study by Burkart et al. (p.269) summarised many of the problems that working class single mothers faced (and still do) on campus as, 'too little time and too little money'. The same study noted that 'fun and leisure were things that had to be postponed' when it came to identifying priorities and managing time. Lovell et al. (2020, p.300) describe how the mothers in their study had 'no time for self-care or being one's self'.

We recall the earlier discussion around working class adult learner identity; now we witness a further aspect of identity to navigate – that of motherhood, where 'student and parenting demands were frequently in conflict' (Haleman, 2004, p.780). Interestingly, Greenberg et al. (2020, p.116) refer to the way that single mothers discuss their sense of 'multidimensional marginality', where

'marginality was defined by their single parenthood, low socio-economic status, life in a peripheral community, and traditional family background'. This reveals further details of the multidimensional elements of identity that must be navigated and understood.

All of this is challenging and energy demanding during so-called normal academic years, but during a global pandemic the intensity of all of these circumstances is quite simply extraordinary. So what does the literature tell us of the motivations that continue to drive working class student single parents? In Burkart et al. (1987, p.264) we learn about a central underlying notion, 'to insure financial security for themselves and their children', indeed mothers 'thought their example motivated their children and made them proud' (ibid., p.266). This is echoed in Greenberg et al. (2020, p.116) where the authors discuss the way in which through 'processes of intergenerational transmission children acquire behavioural patterns and internalise values and attitudes regarding different aspects of life'. The projects of the self that were discussed earlier are visible here, single parents in engaging in projects that are 'aligned with strong sense of community commitment and a desire to give back' (Reay 2002, p.409). Filled with love and commitment for their children and their future wellbeing. Indeed as Lindsay et al. (2018, p.192) write, 'mothers were future oriented; they were concerned with their ability to financially provide for their children in the future'. For working class single parent mothers who become undergraduate students, there is a belief that 'further education is their most probable path to economic security' (Haleman, 2004, p.781). The commitment to their children though does often result in a sense of guilt when they are not there for them to the extent that they were, prior to becoming a student. Burkart et al. (1987, p.266) report that the women in their study 'expressed only the negative effect' that their studies had on their children and how they have very little time for their families. This is expressed again in Lovell et al. (2020, p.300), where single mothers talk of their associated guilt and feelings of being overwhelmed. The authors noted that 'perfectionism was prominent' with the single parents that took part in their study, there seemed to be no space for error as the stakes were too high for anything to go wrong – this was about their future and their children's future.

The challenge that the students face is one where they 'reconcile the possibility of being a good student and a good parent' (Moreau et al., 2015, p.227), indeed, it is possible to be both of these things. Indeed one of the children interviewed in Greenberg et al. (2020, p.121) says of their mother, 'she does so many things

at the same time and excels at all of them'. The way that this child views their mother, may not be the way that neoliberalism does. Those devoted to the hymns of individualism and human responses that are levered by economic rationales, have no understanding of responses born of love and an ethic of care. Neoliberalism and its individual autonomy and individual responsibility have no interest in the 'nurturing that produces love, care, and solidarity' (Cantillon et al., 2017, p.169). Ironically, this may be because neoliberals are aware of the fact that ultimately it is love and solidarity that can remove it from power.

The responsibility of an institution to facilitate a successful transition in, through and on from degree studies of working class single parents, is clear. Yakabolski (2010, p.464) asserts that 'institutional policies and programs should support student mothers and assist them with completing their educational degrees'. Carpenter et al. (2018, p.128) reminds us that the predictors of success of single parent students are 'not invariant personal characteristics that lie outside of the influence of intervention'. The authors continue, 'rather, they appear to be behaviours well within the scope of influence of programs that can be created by institutions'. However, it is important at this point to reflect on Haleman (2004, p.770) when discussing such interventions, 'the women and children directly affected by these policies are routinely viewed as passive objects of intervention rather than active subjects involved in creating their own experiences and capable of self-definition'. With this in mind and through a pedagogy of love, we must eradicate the 'widespread assumption that students' lifestyles are careless and carefree' (Moreau et al., 2015, p.220) and push against the notion expressed by one of the single mothers in same study, when they state 'you can't ever win' (ibid., p.219).

A Door Out of the Dark

Bourdieu and Passeron (1979, p.21) teach us that education could be 'the royal road to the democratisation of culture if it did not consecrate the initial cultural inequalities by ignoring them'. Indeed, as Diane Reay (2001, p.334) reminds us, 'within the educational system all the authority remains vested in the middle classes'. The required policy changes that facilitate an increase in equality of opportunity 'can only be successful if they are matched by policies to ensure equality of outcome' (Inglis et al., 1999, p.39). Yet, 'even with the exciting expansion of further and higher education […] the working-classes have not been the real beneficiaries' (Kennedy, 1997, p.9). Casting our eyes across campus, we are likely to recognise the state of higher education as described by Giroux (2020, p.220), 'higher education now mimics a business culture run

by a managerial army of bureaucrats, drunk on market values, who resemble the high priests of a deadening instrumental rationality'. Genuine solidarity with the working class adult learner is part of the choice that Wacquant (1989, p.8) writes about when interviewing Pierre Bourdieu – we ultimately 'tend to act either toward the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution'. In acting to subvert the oppressive distribution of capital, we align with the oppressed. However, within the academy, Wacquant (ibid., p.18) has concerns; 'often under very radical airs, the intelligentsia almost always contribute to the perpetuation of dominant forces'. As these dominant forces continue to frame and reproduce inequity on campus, I am reminded of Heaney when he writes of the islanders, 'we are bombarded'.

Despite all that pushes against the working class adult learner, I have been witness to a number of remarkable students and their achievements during COVID-19. While such stories are the exception, they serve to remind us of the exceptional lengths the students have gone to, in order to continue their educational journey. I am aware of students that have managed part time work in supermarkets with degree study, bringing up a family and home schooling. I have spoken with students that have cared for elderly loved ones while completing the final year of their degree studies. I know of families that have been hit by the loss of full time work, household income dramatically reduced overnight. Single parent mothers that have home schooled their children while continuing with their degree studies and managing difficult personal circumstances and worries. Consistently, the students are unaware of the immensity of what they do and what they achieve. Their lived experience has been normalised over many years and these struggles are seen as part of the very nature of life. During COVID-19 I have been struck by the comparison of the circumstances that the working class adult learner negotiates with the middle class student. A comparison that reveals a lack of belonging in some middle class students due to their lack of opportunity to join societies and clubs or attend corporate recruitment receptions – two very different worlds (Speirs, 2020, p.135).

Diane Reay (2002, p.409) rightly outlines the very positive dispositions of working class adult learners, when she notes that many 'seem to have developed other ways of accounting for, and displacing, educational failure; ways which allow spaces for recovery'. It is here in this space for hope that Shanahan (2000, p.161) reminds us that many adult learners 'see education as a catalyst for change in their lives' and again that education was 'a chance to rewrite

their life story after experiencing some dissatisfaction with their previous employment' (ibid., p.156). In O'Boyle's (2014) study of friendships, he states that the transformation, or indeed the becoming, of the adult learner 'does not occur instantly, however, and is more commonly described as a gradual process involving a series of transitions and risks (and sometimes ruptures) to self-identity, as well as the imagining of possible selves' (ibid., p.174). The transformative benefits of higher education result in 'an improved sense of self-worth and of being recognized as an active and able participant in society' (ibid.). Deep within the working class adult learner there is a strong personal rationale for embarking on the road leading to a degree qualification. As one student once said to me a few years ago, 'there is nothing or nobody that is going to stop me getting this done'.

Perhaps though we should reflect on Paulo Freire's work as a final way to stand in solidarity with the working class adult learner and his view of love as a political force. Darder (2020, p.236) writes that 'Freire's pedagogy of love challenged deeply the false generosity of those whose ideologies and practices work to sustain a system of education that transgresses at its very core every emancipatory principle of social justice and democratic life'. Freire's pedagogy of love as a tool to overcome the digital inequalities, which the rush for neoliberal modernity sentences the working class adult learner to. A pedagogy of love that frees the working class adult leaner from isolation and loneliness. A pedagogy of love that supports the working class single parent student as they 'beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past' (Fitzgerald, 1953, p.182). Darder (2020, p.237) reminds us that for Freire, 'love constitutes an intentional and communal act of consciousness that emerges and matures through our social and material practices'. In the current global pandemic we must engage with a radical hope that will inspire the kindness of solidarity with the working class adult learner, as Darder (2020, p.238) posits, 'love as a dialectic force that simultaneously unites and respects difference must be imagined as a radical and interdependent sense of lived kinship'. This kinship in accordance with love as a political force can truly dissolve the neoliberal assault on the notion of shared values, hopes and experiences and free the oppressed.

Conclusions

Since the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic, some of the dominant classes and cultures of society have become aware of the inequalities that the working class experience during their daily lives. It is important that we do not

allow the devastation of the pandemic to be identified as the singular reason for the inequalities of society. We cannot allow a new doxa to be formed, one that states that the inequalities experienced are merely a result of the global pandemic. This would exclude the dominant classes and cultures from any culpability from their part in the reproduction of these inequalities. The dominant classes and cultures have written the structures that frame and reproduce inequalities. These structures lead to the inequalities that have become more widely known about in recent times. The global pandemic has not caused these inequalities; they existed long before COVID-19 spread across the world. What has happened is that the inequalities have been amplified to levels never seen before, leading to greater hardships for the working class.

The working class adult learner in higher education has experienced extended amplified hardships over the last months. In particular, and of greatest concern to me, were issues around loneliness, digital exclusion and the daily-lived experience of single parent students. One thing is quite clear, pedagogical practice and institutional policies perpetrate these struggles. In the first steps to stand in solidarity, some practical things can be done. Firstly is creating the non-assessed space to engage in serious play. This can include repeated engagement with exercises using digital technology. This repeated engagement develops a familiarisation and normalised approach. In a sense, re-defining the relationship with digital technologies, beyond task oriented habitualised notions. This is not a two-week programme; this is a longer pedagogical commitment – one that scaffolds learning. With both institutional policy and pedagogical practices, we must avoid the 'widespread assumption that students' lifestyles are careless and carefree' (Moreau et al., 2015, p.220). Building on this we must then be aware of the important warning that Mallman et al. (2017, p.514) provide, 'the epistemological underpinnings of many attempts at understanding mature-age students […] result in species approaches'. The authors continue by noting that it is necessary, 'to consider biographical factors to understand the variety of their motivations and life and learning circumstances'. This results in an approach that values the insights that come from simply getting to know our students and then building from their identity. A true critical pedagogy that fuels the drive to free them from the symbolic violence of societal structures that frame and reproduce inequality and that 'spits like a tame cat, turned savage' (Heaney, 1991, p.38).

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SECTION TWO

Book and Policy Reviews

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

BERTRAM C. BRUCE
ISBN: 978-1-4758-5119-9
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.

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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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Notes

Notes

The Adult Learner is the Irish journal for adult and community education founded in the mid 1980s and is published by AONTAS.

Its aim is to serve the needs of the adult education and lifelong learning community both in Ireland and internationally by providing a forum for critical discussion and reflection. The journal seeks to make new knowledge easily accessible to the widest possible audience through emphasising the importance of describing and critiquing practice and through publishing the results of research. The journal gives priority to subject matter that addresses issues of community, citizenship and learning and which focus on disadvantage, literacy and equality. It also includes contributions on how adults learn in formal, non-formal and informal settings including life and work contexts.

The journal provides a forum for publication and dissemination of reflections on research, policy and practice in the broad field of adult and community education.

The journal can also be viewed on the AONTAS website, where further details on how individuals can make contributions are made available each year. Visit www.aontas.com for more information.

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