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# **Community Education Network**

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**Evolution in Community  
Education**

**February 2020**

# AONTAS Community Education Network Meeting



**Date:** Wednesday, 19th February 2020

**Venue:** Irish Human Rights

and Equality Commission (IHREC), 16-22 Green Street,

Dublin 7

**Time:** 09.30am – 2.00pm

**Theme:**  
Evolution in Community Education

# Agenda

**Registration, networking, tea & coffee**

**Welcome, advocacy updates, and the CEN Census**

Suzanne Kyle, CEN Coordinator

Niamh O' Reilly, AONTAS CEO

Eve Cobain, AONTAS Research Officer

**An Cosán Digital Stepping Stones Project**

Mark Kelly, An Cosán VCC (Virtual Community College)

**A dialogue on the evolution of discourse  
and language of adult education**

Denise Shannon, Léargas

**Break**

**Introduction to the Saolta Development Education Project**

Bobby McCormick, Development Perspectives

**How the ideas of Paulo Freire and bell hooks can shape community education**

Camilla Fitzsimons, Maynooth University

Mary Maher, DALC (Dublin Adult Learning Centre)

**Final reflections and close of meeting**

Suzanne Kyle

**Lunch and networking**

# Introduction

Continuous change and evolution are key features of adult and community education and very often reflect the responsive nature of the practice. Evolution is shaped by different factors, some of which happen from the ground up and some are driven by policy. The meeting of the CEN that took place in February 2020 was our last face-to-face gathering before a period of very significant change in response to the COVID 19 crisis and an evolution in community education that nobody could have predicted.

The meeting opened with an introduction by CEN Coordinator, Suzanne Kyle, and a presentation from AONTAS CEO Niamh O' Reilly on the policy and advocacy work of AONTAS in the area of community education.

Niamh spoke about the areas through which AONTAS has influence including the Department of Education as well as other boards, steering groups and committees.



# AONTAS representation on external Boards and Steering groups

- SOLAS Board
- QQI Board
- EAEA Board
- D8CEC Board
- European Commission- European Agenda for Adult Learning National Coordinator
- DES - National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015—2019 Steering Group
- DES - Upskilling Pathways Steering Group
- RPL Practitioner Network Steering Group
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Consultative Forum
- SOLAS - Steering Committee for the National Adult Literacy and Numeracy awareness-raising campaign
- SOLAS - Programme and Learner Support Systems (PLSS) Steering Group
- Northern Ireland Impact Forum
- QQI European Referencing Group
- SOLAS Level 3-4 Evaluation Tender Review Working Group
- QQI Quality Assurance Learner Panel Steering Group
- Saolta Project Steering Group

# CEN Census

AONTAS Research Officer Eve Cobain provided information about the CEN Census, an initiative of AONTAS focused on collecting information annually on community education in order to do the following:

- Provide factual insight about the community education sector in Ireland, which will help create an evidence base for the purpose of advocating and lobbying on behalf of the sector.
- Promote a thriving community education sector as defined in the AONTAS Strategic Plan 2019-2022.

The survey is designed to provide:

1. Key information on the funding models for community education, including details around the various streams
2. An overview of the types of learners engaging in community education including gender, socio economic background, education level etc.
3. Details of the wide range of accredited and non-accredited courses on offer in community education across the country
4. Detail regarding modes of progression in community education
5. The extent to which community education is supported by volunteers

Data from this survey will facilitate a better understanding of:

- The challenges faced by providers in securing adequate funding for the sector
- How funding is released and administered
- The amount of time spent applying for and reporting on funding outcomes
- Particular geographic areas where community education is underfunded
- Particular courses that are underfunded
- Community education's role in engaging hard to reach learners



# An Cosán Digital Stepping Stones Project

The meeting provided the opportunity to hear about a new digital literacy assessment tool aimed at supporting adult learners to assess their level of IT literacy.

Project Manager at An Cosán VCC, Mark Kelly, providing some context for the development of this project, highlighted that only 45% of Ireland's adult population have at least basic digital skills.

CEN members were invited to collaborate with An Cosán VCC in helping to bridge the digital divide by collaborating in the pilot testing of the assessment solution

In the near future

**9/10**

jobs will require some level of digital skills

but only **48%**

of Ireland's adult population have at least **BASIC DIGITAL SKILLS**



leading to an imbalance between supply and demand of digital skills

The policy context for this work includes the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens which was developed to offer a framework to improve citizens' digital competence



# An Cosán Digital Stepping Stones Project

Digital Stepping Stones tool will be a first step for adult and community learners

- To understand their **current digital capability**
- Appreciate the **digital skills they have**
- And how these initial skills can be transferable
- That there are **a range of competences** needed to be digitally proficient in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- And how they can **fill any gaps** in their basic digital skillset.

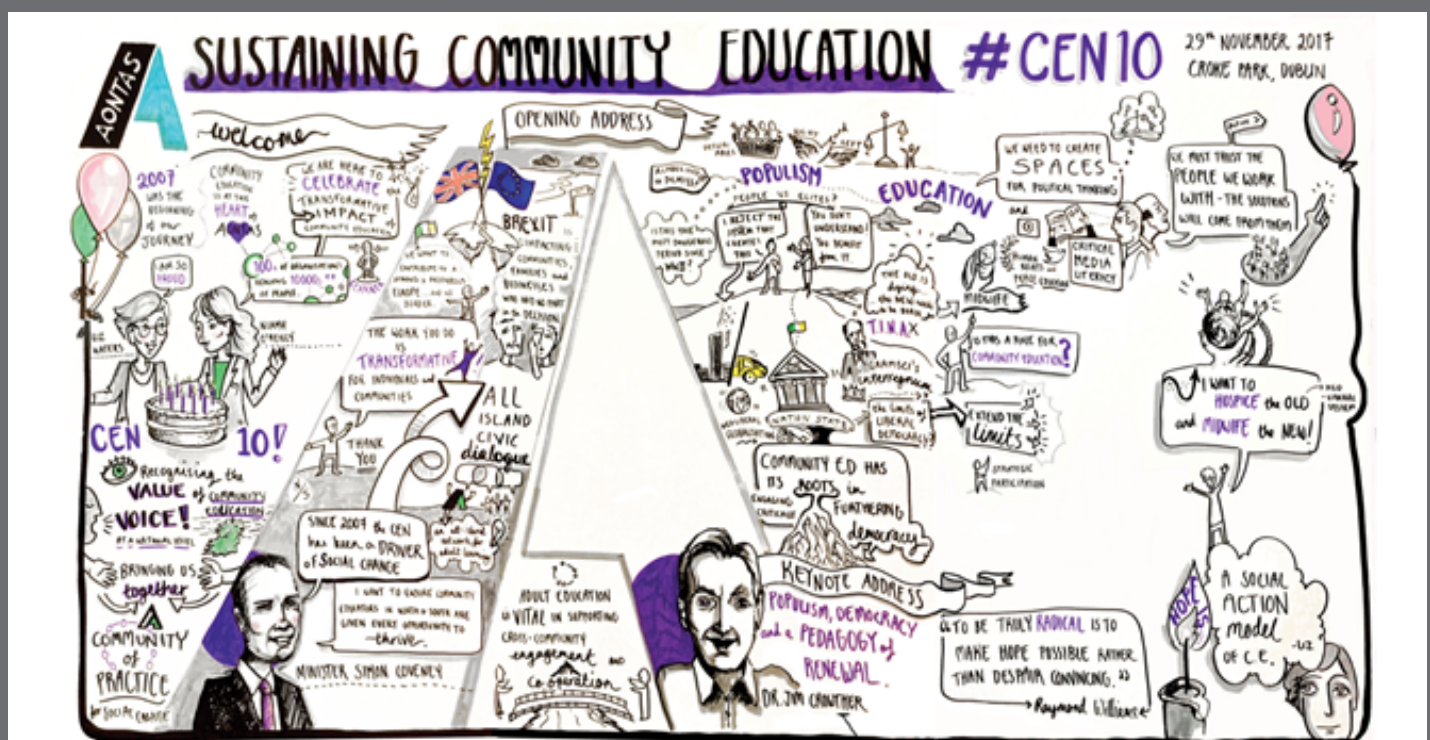
## Five Digital Stepping Stones to Tailored Digital Learning Content



# The evolution of discourse and language of adult education

Language and discourse in the area of adult and community education is continuously evolving and has seen significant changes at policy level in the past twenty years since the publication of Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education.

Given the extent to which language and discourse can shape practice on the ground, this is an area of particular interest for CEN members. Denise Shannon, Senior Support and Development Officer with Léargas, who has carried out a study on language and discourse in adult education, spoke to the CEN about her journey and findings.



# The evolution of discourse and language of adult education

Significant points from Denise's presentation included the following:

- Discursive shift in policy language in EU policy over time has been mirrored in national policy
- Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education, which was published in 2000, was Ireland's first national policy on adult education. Lifelong learning was the vision of this policy document
- Language impacts on the wider societal purpose of adult education particularly in terms of adults and communities experiencing the greatest education and social inequality
- Power dynamics can be revealed through language and discourses. They can create a 'common sense' view of how things are or how they should be
- By mapping policy texts across time and the 'European policy space' it is possible to see discourses of lifelong learning, globalisation and skills
- Language has moved from principles of equality, interculturalism, citizenship, inclusion and democracy to become more about 'employability'
- Skills which replaced lifelong learning as the vision for EU policy from 2008 onwards would frame the Further Education and Training Strategy (2014 – 2019)

## Social democratic/value based language in adult education

- Society
- Social inclusion
- Equality
- Democracy
- Community

## Economic focused language in adult education

- Globalisation, competition,
- Knowledge economy
- Smart economy
- Efficiency, competitiveness
- Evidence based
- Return on investment (ROI)

## Some interesting findings about the concept of lifelong learning:

### UNESCO

'Learning to Be' (1972) lifelong education was a humanistic exercise towards the fulfilment of man

Lifelong learning orientated adult education in terms of productivity and competitiveness .

It was described as the 'magic spell' in the discourse of policy makers

Redefined the term 'lifelong learning' saw its closer alignment to the goals and needs of globalisation than democracy/ reconfiguring the relations between the state and the citizen

The concept of lifelong learning and its definition did not come from education policy but rather employment/ industrial policy ( Luxembourg process)

Some interesting questions were explored during the presentation such as the idea of equating inclusion with employment and the contradictions between this view and the world of precarious employment and the working poor.

Critically analysing language and discourse in policy allows practitioners to question assumptions and read policy 'against the grain' in order to enhance an understanding of how policy works and be an effective advocate for community education.

Denise's presentation is available on the EPAL CEN closed group, or on request. Denise also has an article about this subject in the 2019 edition of the AONTAS Adult Learner Journal.

# Saolta Development Education Project



Saolta Steering Group members at the project launch which took place in January this year. From left to right: Bobby McCormack, Development Perspectives; Suzanne Kyle, AONTAS; Sinead Dooley, Irish Rural Link; Michael Doorly, Concern Worldwide; Michael Kenny, Maynooth University

Saolta, an Irish word that translates to 'Worldly Wise' is a programme which will explore a variety of global issues with stakeholders from the Adult and Community Education sector. Issues such as poverty, inequality and climate change will feature strongly as areas of engagement.

The programme will target Adult and Community Education workers in a variety of ways including interactive workshops with Further Education Institutions and Public Participation Networks across the country.

Another aspect of Saolta, the SDG Advocate programme will offer active citizens an opportunity to represent their community, by becoming one of Ireland's positive changemakers. The eight-month training course will allow the advocates to deepen their understanding of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, represent the project internationally and lead transformative change in Ireland.

The original plan was that chosen participants would travel to Vietnam or Tanzania for two weeks work/study visit that will afford an invaluable chance to experience first-hand perspectives and challenges that people face in a different global context. These plans are currently being reviewed in light of the Covid19 crisis.

Other facets of the programme will involve coaching and mentoring, webinars, networking meetings along with a library of resources which will also be produced over the next 2- 3 years.

# Saolta Resources

Of particular interest to community education practitioners will be the following resources:

**A Sustainable Development (SDG) Workbook** focused on raising awareness of the SDGs within an Irish context and promoting actions to address issues outlined in the SDGs. [This workbook can be found here.](#)

**Stepping Stones for the Sustainable Development Goals: A Workbook for Community and Adult Education Practitioners.**

The purpose of this workbook is to provide tools for adult and community education groups and their leaders to understand the SDGs and take meaningful action on them. [This can be found here.](#)

**Training of Trainers: A Toolkit for Active Learning in the Adult and Community Sector.** The purpose of this toolkit is to support practitioners who are interested in global issues and facilitating engaged critical and collective thinking about justice, human rights, equality and sustainability. The toolkit outlines a series of key questions and includes lesson plans that include learning objectives and a suggested methodology for exploring the key questions. [This toolkit can be found here.](#)

Information on the Saolta project, as well as all of these resources can be found on the Saolta page of the [Development Perspectives website click here.](#)

# Shaping community education practice

The final inputs of the meeting were facilitated by Mary Maher of Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) and Dr. Camilla Fitzsimons of Maynooth University and provided a space to reflect on how theories of adult education can influence thinking and practice in community education.

Director of DALC Mary Maher spoke to the CEN members about the importance of transformative, inclusive, and social justice approaches to community education. Such values underpin the work of DALC and allow for the strengthening of intercultural relationships and the promotion of democratic and civic engagement in Dublin's North Inner City.

Mary spoke of initiatives aimed at building social and community cohesion, and creating awareness about voter rights, climate change and global justice, issues which are central to the work of DALC.



# Shaping community education practice

During an interactive session Camilla drew on the theories of Paulo Freire and bell hooks to highlight the role community education can play in giving a voice to people who are socially excluded.

Paulo Freire's work has influenced people working in education, community development, community health and many other fields. Freire developed an approach to education that links the identification of issues to positive action for change and development. While Freire's original work was in adult literacy, his approach leads us to think about how we can 'read' the society around us.

For Freire, the educational process is never neutral. People can be passive recipients of knowledge, whatever the content, or they can engage in a 'problem-posing' approach in which they become active participants. As part of this approach, it is essential that people link knowledge to action so that they actively work to change their societies at a local level and beyond.

Bell hooks, an American author, professor, feminist, and social activist, writes about a transgressive approach in education where educators can teach students to "transgress" against racial, sexual, and class boundaries in order to achieve the gift of freedom.



Hooks believes education should be life-sustaining and mind expanding, believing that the teacher and student together work in partnership. Hooks believes education is a vocation rooted in hopefulness and she locates hope in places of struggle where people can positively transforming their lives and the world around them.

# Additional resources

You can learn more about Paulo Freire and bell hooks and their views on education and learning by watching the following videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNm38AdciTc&t=1s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFWjnkFypFA>

Mary Maher's presentation is available on the EPALE CEN group or by request by contacting a member of the AONTAS staff team.



For information or to join the Community Education Network contact the Community Education Network Coordinator Suzanne Kyle at: [skyle@aontas.com](mailto:skyle@aontas.com)

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