The Voice of Adult Learning

AONTAS Adult Education Summit

Shaping Europe's Future through Adult Education

Radisson Blu Royal Hotel / 22 October 2026



SOLAS learning works

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

ÉIRE2026.EU
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Imeacht Gaolmhar | Associated Event

Co-funded by the European Union

Education is Political and Politics is Educational:

Adult Education for Citizens in a Democracy

Ted Fleming

Emeritus professor Maynooth University

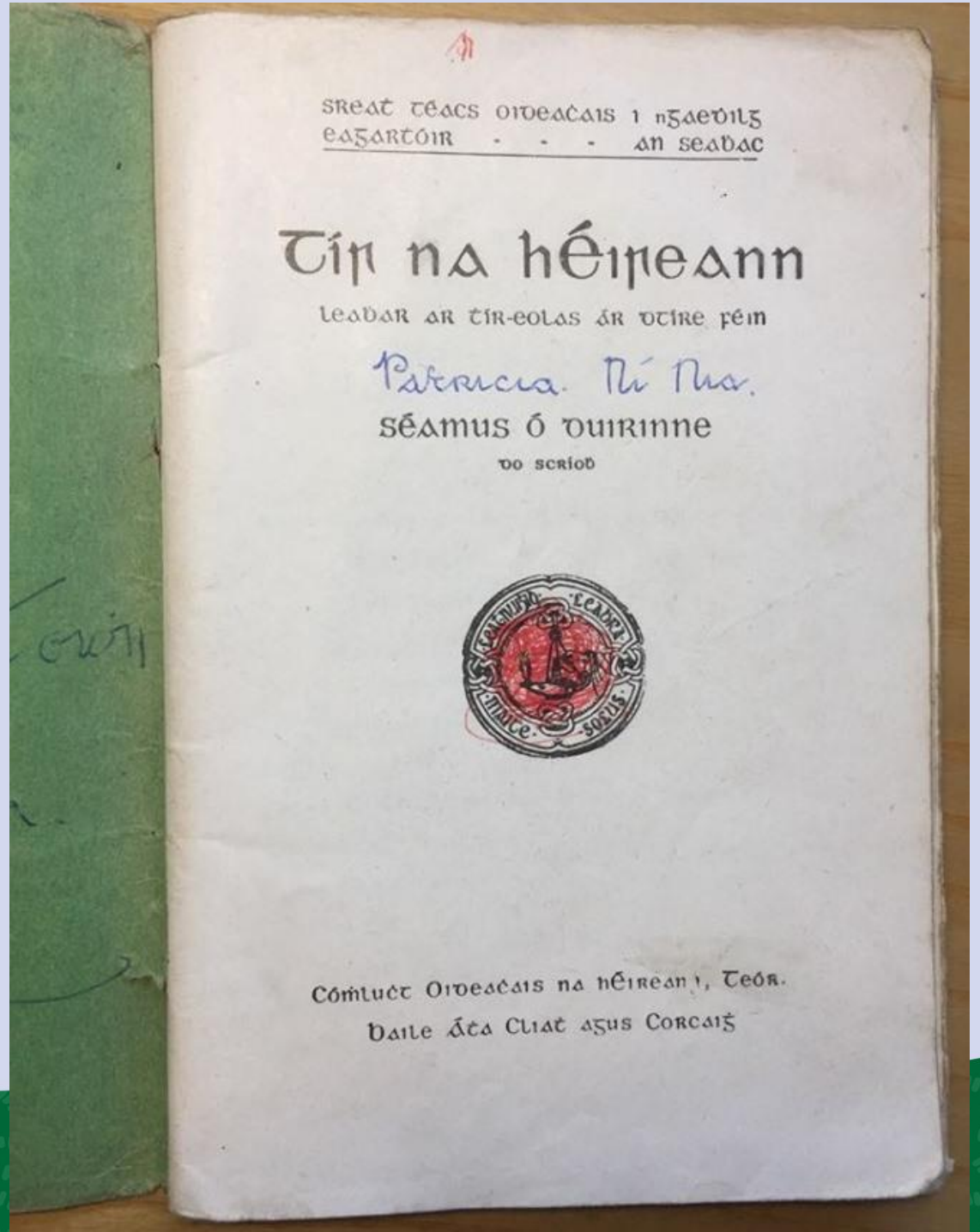
Adjunct professor Teachers College Columbia University, New York

Email: ejf2129@tc.columbia.edu

MAYNOOTH
UNIVERSITY

Teachers College
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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SREAT TEACS OIDEACAIS I NGAEDILG
EAGARTOIR - - - AN SEABAC

Tir na hEireann

LEABAR AR TIR-EOLAS AR DTIRE FEIN

Patricia Ní Nua.

SEAMUS Ó DUIRINNE

DO SCRIOB

Comluct Oideacais na hEireann, Teor.
Baile Ata Cliat agus Corcaig

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Tír na hÉireann

Roinn a I.

Féach ar léarscáil na hEorpa agus cífidh tú dá oileán siar amach ó'n mór-tír.

An t-oileán is lugha díob agus is sia siar, sin é Éire—ár dtír féin.

An Bhreatain Mhór an t-oileán eile.

Tá an Bhreatain Mhór idir Éire agus an mhór-tír.

Is i Éire an tír is sia siar de tíortaib na hEorpa act Inis Tuile amháin, act tá an t-oileán san com fada ó thuaidh ná fuil sé i mbealach na long a bíonn ag dul siar agus ag teacht aniar thar an Atlantach, agus ní'l aon roinn uisce ar domhan a mbíonn an oiread tráchtála air agus a bíonn ar an bhfairrge sin idir mór-tír na hEorpa agus an domhan thiar.

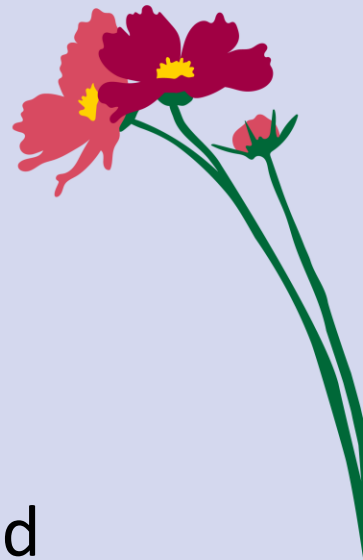
Tá cuanta breágha i nÉirinn, go mór-mhór ar an dtaobh thiar (féach orta ar an léarscáil). Geobhaidh na hárthraige is mó ar fairrge teacht isteach iontu. An méid sin amháin, agus í i mbealach na long soir, siar, is mór an buntáiste a thugann sé di maidir le tráchtáil. Tá an fairrge mhór, leathan siar uaithe go

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1932

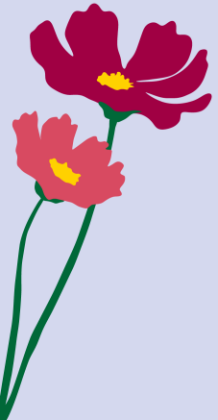


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…no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which at least for ourselves, contain in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say. Thought itself…arises out of the actuality of incidents, and incidents of lived experience must remain its guideposts by which thinking soars, or into the depths to which it descends.

(Arendt, 2018)



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History?

- History and experiences prompt thinking;
- Experience drives learning;
- What kind of workers and
- what kind of society are we learning for?
- What kind of *ár dtír féin?* A nation and/or an economy?
- We trace our thinking, our thoughts, our politics our views about education - back to what happened previously in our lives.

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Easter 1916

Irishmen and Irishwomen…

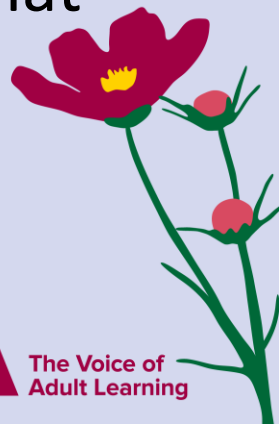
In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom. We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland…

The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, ….

(Easter, 2024)

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- **Nostalgia** – a way of talking about neoliberalism;
- **Self-confidence** is the real currency of adult education/FET;
- **In-between** – a way of talking about the role of educator/teacher in this complex world;
- **Literature of Ireland** – a deep reservoir of idea and commitments that are uniquely Irish.



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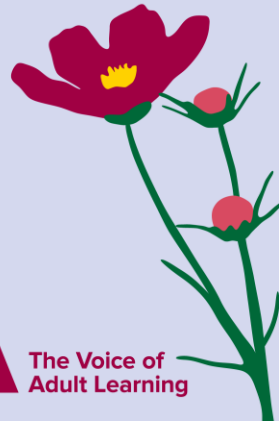
What is adult education for?

- Learning transforms experience.
  - Transforming experience into what? How? For what purpose?
- Learning for a sociological imagination;
- Creating spaces for conversation;
- Start with learners experience in order to critically interrogate the past and imagine the future – a learning future;
- Learning and teaching to think like an adult – the difficult, critical, historically informed;
- To make connections especially between the universal and particular;
- Training for a form of work characterized as democratic and fair.

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The political task for adult education: A Right to Lifelong Learning

- Establish as a public policy:
- As all education has a right to learn at its core, so -
- **All adults have a right to learn all that it is possible to learn for their entire lives.**



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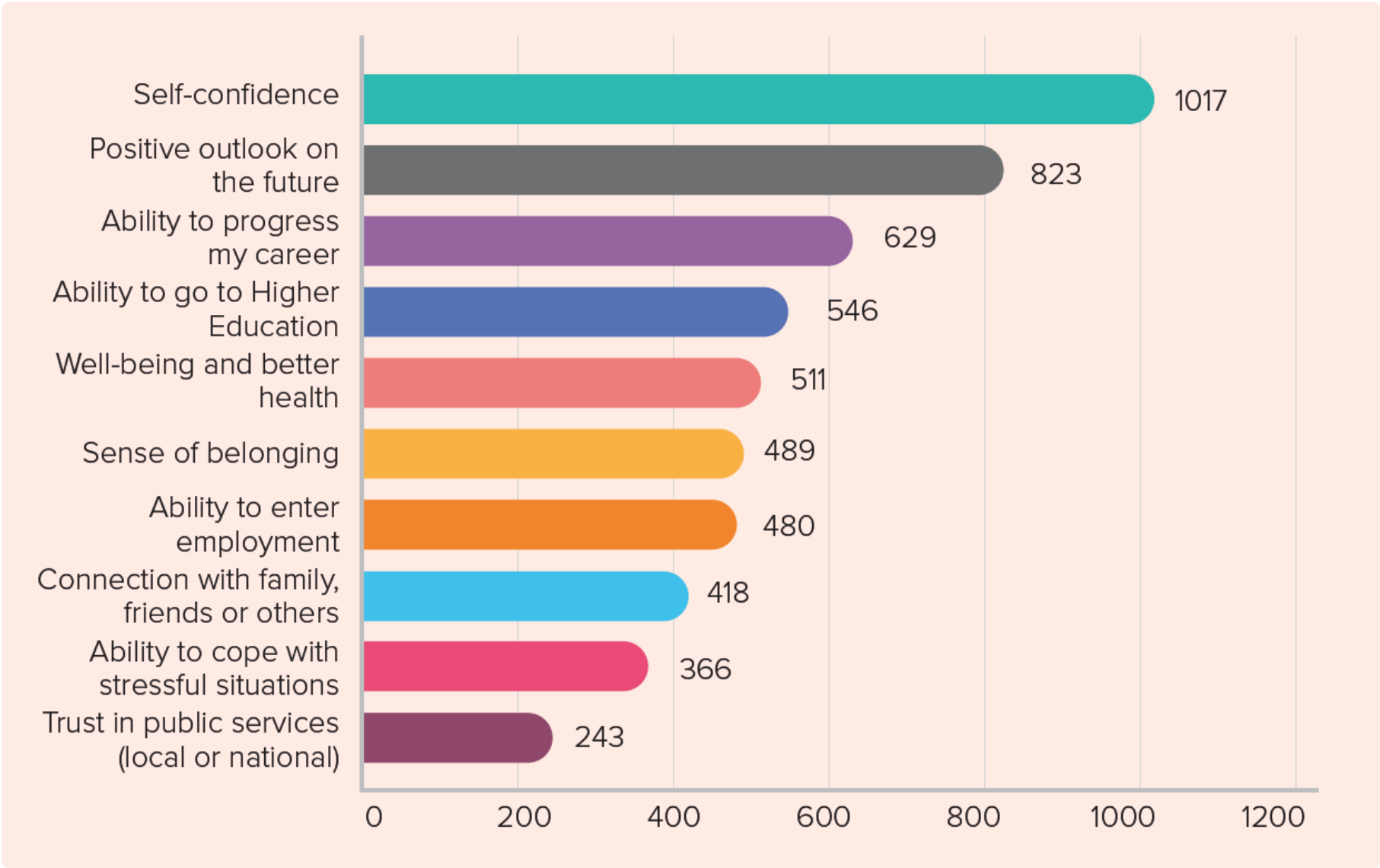
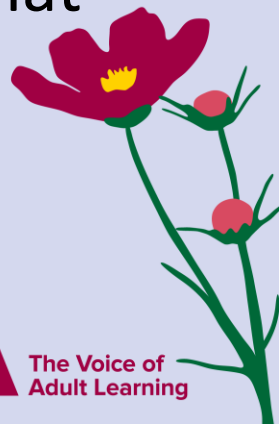


Figure 9 – *Responses to "During your time in your adult learning course, have you experienced an increase in any of the following?"*

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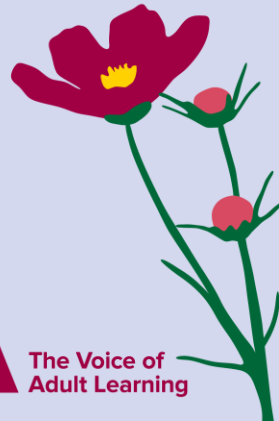
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Adult Educators as “In-between” Workers

Two buckets were easier carried than one.
I grew up in between.

Here is a space
Again, the scone rising
To the tick of two clocks.

Heaney, S. (1998). *Opened ground: Poems 1966-1996* (pp. 94 & 295). Faber and Faber.



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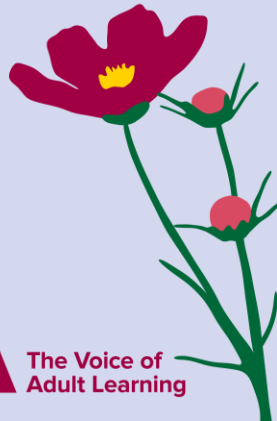
Heaney “In-between” and Tollund Man

Their scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyard.

Later:

Out in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

Heaney, S. (1998). *Opened ground: Poems 1966-1996* (p. 65). Faber and Faber.



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James Joyce on “in-between”

snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.



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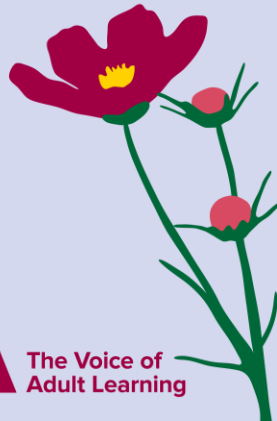
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- Training for a form of work infused with democratic and fair practices;
- Teach to make connections, hold competing polarities.

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This feeling the attic does not belong to the house but exists in its own right, an anteroom of shadow and disorder as though the place were the home of memory itself, seeing before her the remnants of their younger selves, the self folded, packed into boxes, bagged and discarded, lost in the disarray of vanished and forgotten other selves, the dust laying itself down upon years of their lives, the years of their lives turning to dust, what will remain and what little will remain and how little can be known about who we were, in the closing of eye we will all be gone.

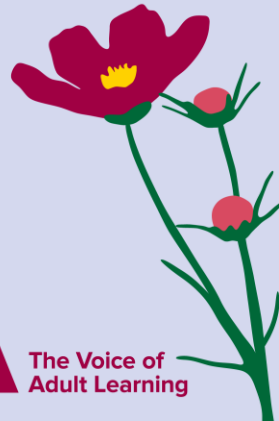
Lynch, P. (2023). *Phantom Song*, p. 176.



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it is always a local event, it comes to your country and visits your town and knocks on the door of your house and becomes to others but some distant warning, a brief report on the news, an echo of events that has passed into folklore.

Lynch, P. (2023). *Phantom Song*, p. 304.



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And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

Heaney, 1998, p. 444

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