A Complex Web We Weave: Learning for Work – Working to Learn

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Work is one of the most important activities in our lives but it has been getting a really bad press for some time. From the earliest stories in the Bible work is described as part of the punishment regime for Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:18). What a bad beginning and so long ago! This foundational story of the Judeo-Christian tradition has had a profound impact on our view of work. The third commandment in the Bible forbids work on the Sabbath (or at least requires that it be kept holy - see Exodus 20:8-10; Deut, 5:14).

In addition one of the greatest controversies in the history of Christianity is about whether we are saved by the grace of God or by our own work. In the Catholic tradition work has a dual purpose (the original multi-tasking!) of punishment and as the way to salvation. But enough theology!

Only with Karl Marx (and later with Weber) has there been a more systematic understanding of work as part of an economy. Marx viewed work as our creative activity - which in the capitalist system actually disconnects us from our creativity. Work is in this way alienating (Marx, 1844). It is this critical view of the economy that was in a particular way offensive to the church and it has fought long and hard to counter these critical ideas of the Marxist tradition. The church has been afraid of sex and communism and both were seen as subversive and dangerous. Confession was to take care of sex and education (including adult education) was to take care of communism!

This may come as a surprise, but it is in the nature of summer schools that they allow for ideas, thoughts and questions that might provoke us as participants to think through again some of the ideas we take for granted. To think critically. A good example of how we can engage in such critique is to take some of the phrases used in popular debates. “We are where we are”, is a good one. The most important casualty of any critique is this one: “it is common sense!” Common sense is exactly the thinking that the system uses to ensure that the division of resources, wealth and power remains as is and appears to be ‘common sense’. Of course it is neither common nor sensible. What appears to be common sense is always suspect! So in what way is adult education implicated in the process and where will such a journey get us?

If ‘we are where we are’, how did we get here?
One of the early mentions of adult education in Ireland is in the Vocational Education Act of 1930. VECs were given a mandate to provide adult education classes. This predated the Constitution of 1937, the Eucharistic Congress of 1932 and Douglas Hyde was in the Áras (1938). All this happened at an important time in our history as Ireland had in the 20th century already seen a World War, the Irish War of Independence, the Civil War and in the following decade was engaged in an Economic War with our nearest neighbour. It is an interesting aside to recall that the Economic War of the 1930s was prompted by de Valera and Irish tenant farmers refusing to pay back loans they had received from Britain before independence. The British response was to place a 20 per cent import duty on Irish goods (Ferriter, 2004, p. 368). Burning bondholders has been done. In this same period de Valera put in place an Irish Constitution (Bunreacht, 1937); ‘bought back’ the ports and copper fastened the role of the Catholic

Church as the dominant social and political authority in Ireland. In support of that dominance there was a Vatican *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1559-1966) and the first Irish Censorship Act was enacted in 1929.

Apart from the mostly vocational courses delivered by the various VECs, adult education courses were delivered under the heading of Catholic Sociology. Sociology in both UCD and Maynooth was called Catholic Sociology with a Professor of Catholic Sociology in Maynooth from 1930 until 1970. UCC did not have to call it Catholic Sociology as it had the famous O’Rahilly taking care of the vested interests of the church. Cathal Daly wrote about a Christus Rex summer school for clergy at Maynooth in 1947 and stated that;

> These discussions which will form a very important aspect of the Summer School, will be concentrated on specific questions arising from the general theme, and will endeavour to reach a clear formulation of the Catholic and priestly attitudes towards these problems. In this way, constructive work may be done by Christus Rex in the interpretation and application of Catholic social principles.

(Daly, 1947, p. 5)

Catholic Sociology had a curriculum in which official church social teaching was handed down to the masses and the main texts were the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). These made the case for private property and the illusion of socialism and communism. They supported the concept of a just wage and outlawed child labour. Adult courses emphasised the importance of Catholic social teaching and McQuaid, Archbishop of Dublin, supported the idea that the church should be the dominant partner in Church State relations and that only ‘the right people’ should teach Catholic Philosophy, Catholic Sociology and, by implication and practice, Catholic Adult Education. It was to be a Catholic State for a Catholic people (with its corollary in Northern Ireland), thus contributing to fixing divisions on this island for a considerable time.

A number of educational institutions assisted in this project for adults. In the first instance, the most important institute of adult education was the Extra-Mural provision of UCD known previously as the Catholic University of Ireland. The Dublin Diocesan Study Centre also provided adult education and it became the Institute of Catholic Sociology at Mountjoy Square. The name was changed again in the 1960s (by Liam Carey of Maynooth) to the Dublin Institute of Adult Education. It is known today as Dublin Adult Learning Centre. There was also the Catholic Worker’s College founded by the Jesuits that later became the National College of Industrial Relations (Sandford) and more recently it became the National College of Ireland. If its roots were clearly in Catholic Sociology its first non-Jesuit President was Joyce O’Connor who became President “from the time the deal for the new campus was agreed in 1977” (Cooper 2009, p. 237). Her brother, Seanie Fitzpatrick of Anglo Irish Bank, was involved in funding the move to the IFSC. The current Chairperson of the governing body is Denis O’Brien against whom adverse findings have been made by the Moriarty Tribunal. These are not insignificant facts (Morrissey, 1998).

Other adult education institutions had a different take on education and the People’s College in Parnell Square, sponsored by the Trades Unions and run by Sheila Conroy for many years (Sheila died this month), modelled itself on the Workers Education Association (WEA) of Britain and offered itself as an alternative to the UCD Extra Mural provision. Adult education was a fiercely contested space where the contest was for the right to hand on through adult education core values and culture.
This brief mention of NCI is interesting as it marks a significant part of the transition from Church dominated educational systems to more economic dominated institutions. If in those times all moral authority resided in the church then it was not only removed but replaced by the other equally colonizing power of the economy. This transition has been gradual and it is easier to stand back at some distance and notice it than to identify an exact moment.

Ireland changed very fast in the 1960s. The Patrick Hillary sponsored OECD Report *Investment in Education* was published in 1962 (see Murray, 2012), the Second Vatican Council ended in 1965 and by the end of that decade (1970) the Institutes of Technology were founded. All this marked the beginning of the end of church and clerical domination of education and adult education. It could be argued that this may also have been the beginning of the rise of an economic agenda becoming the new dominant driver of education and adult education.

The argument I am making may not be accepted by all, but few will disagree that the way in which the economy is run may well not be in accord with the Ten Commandments. But maybe we could do with an economy that is guided by some moral and ethical compass. The often repeated statement that there were no ethics then indicates that there is a sense that ethics only exists if framed in regulations, rules or laws. Any concept of morality or of a principled ethic is missing in many public discourses and this (to return to the theology theme at the beginning) indicates that the entire New Testament (not to mention 2,000 years of Christian tradition) may have escaped the attention not only of politicians but of many in society also (Byrne, 2012, p. 143). But the reason I am spending this time on the background of the educational system is because the history is important in mapping how we got to here. If as they say “we are where we are” we should know in some detail how we got here.

**It’s the economy stupid: Or the stupid economy**

Is there a new dominating influence on adult education (and on education in general)? I think there is and the Theo-centric model has been replaced by another. And I hope you agree that the economic imperatives of the market generally known as the neo-liberal agenda have become the new ‘centric’ influencing or dominating education – we have become Econo-centric. But at this pivotal point in our national history we know that the economic system is a failed entity. If you do not agree that it is a failed entity you might want to consider it as having, at least, a bi-polar disorder, a complete manic depressive at a system level swinging from excess and mania to depression. It is equally unwell whether in manic boom or depression. It has succeeded in bringing about the collapse of the construction industry, the banks and in its place the burden falls on the poor and disadvantaged to pay off the debts of others. Each country in the EU and beyond has its own version of the capitalist system gone profoundly wrong. How do we teach about such things? What do we teach now?

How can ordinary people understand the scandals, the abuses, the corruptions and gamblings of financial institutions? How can anyone even contemplate a way forward? What do we need to know in order to raise our children well and in order to also contribute to the economic survival of this country? How can we learn such thing? Who will teach? Is there a task for an educational system here? Is the educational system also implicated? How can it not be? Who should be teaching about such things? And how? Who would prefer if we did not come to any understanding of these matters? Who will benefit from us not knowing? It raises questions both about who we were, who we are and who we would like to be for the future.
The economy will not solve all our problems and having (since Thatcher and Regan) heard so often that the state needs to get smaller and let business regulate itself, now we ironically have business demanding that it be included and consulted in education; and that it may want to regulate the curriculum and just as it was about to succeed in this, we suddenly realise that the economy was entirely wrong all along and that the banks cannot be kept afloat without massive support from the state. And if business and industry continue to insist on their needs being met in the education syllabus, on continuing to demand state subsidised training, continue to wage a relentless campaign against even a minimal public sector and ever shrinking social welfare provision then we may have to continue to teach that to a large extent it is the Irish economy that has failed to meet the learning needs and other needs of workers. According to the OECD Irish business and commence has one of the lowest rates of expenditure on training in the world. This is the same economy that has failed to deliver jobs, failed to maintain pension funds for workers and finally failed by losing all in a gambling binge. The price will be paid by parents and their families as forced emigration returns. So much to learn. So much to teach.

If all learning is not to be of economic benefit then what other learning needs do we want to promote? Adults have many other roles that lead them to have learning needs - family roles, roles in community and the many learning needs as citizens. Universities and adult education are also responsible for teaching people to be citizens and members of communities. They will not just produce workers, but critical, caring, just, thoughtful, attentive and creative adults. The aim of adult education is to respond to the entire range of adults learning needs and argue, struggle, fight, protest and engage in policy formulation, research, teaching so as to bring about this. We are not neutral players on an educational stage but advocates for a critical lifelong learning.

Does adult education have anything to say about all this? Do teachers of adults have a role in teaching about this? Do students want to understand more about what is happening in this complex world? You know I am going to suggest a yes answer.

**Education in Hard Times**

But all this knowledge of how the system works is not new. Charles Dickens knew this in 1854 when he wrote the short novel *Hard Times*. He tells the story of a schoolmaster Mr. Gradgrind who teaches his pupils facts, only facts and in his world facts is all that matters. He taught his young pupils with their “tender young imaginations that must be stormed away” (p. 4). “Girl number twenty” is asked to “define a horse”. She is unable to do so in the way that is acceptable to Mr. Gradgrind. Only Bitzer is able:

Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye teeth, and twelve incisors. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth…

(Dickens, 1995, p. 5)

In an attempt to “knock the common sense” out of Sissy he asks her whether she would paper a room with pictures of horses. Of course she would and lay a carpet with flower patterns on the floor. All is to the horror of Mr Gradgrind. In fact she would decorate her room as she fancied. This was her mistake! She was not to fancy. She was to have nothing to do with imagination, only facts. “That’s it. You are never to fancy” said Gradgrind (Dickens, 1995, p. 7). This school was all facts “and what you couldn’t state in
figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and salable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen” (p.19).

Gradgrind’s daughter Louise was a pupil of Mr. Choakumchild and she had “a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow” (p. 11). Later Gradgrind makes an arranged marriage between Louise and Mr Bourderby who was “the Bully of humility” (p. 13).

The story continues, and the years go by described in great detail by Dickens when Louise returns to confront her father not just about the arranged/forced marriage but about all her childhood. In one of those speeches we find all through literature like in Chekov, A Doll’s House or Austen in Pride and Prejudice, Louise says

> what have you done with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here!....you have never nurtured me....if I had been able to exercise my fancy I would have been a million times wiser, happier, loving, more contented…and human in all respects…

(Dickens, 1995, p. 169)

The current crisis in Ireland is a crisis of imagination! We need less learning to do with the awful “flat earth” thinking proposed by Thomas L. Friedman (2005) in his New York Times bestseller The World is Flat where everything in the globalised world is being homogenised in the interests of profit. We need more of the imaginative and multi-perspectives that are written about in Colm McCann’s (2009) Let the Great World Spin where multiple and diverse ways of viewing the world are welcomed, celebrated and an inescapable dimension of being human.

I am making the case for a kind of learning that involves imagining. It is in sharp contrast to the functional, instrumental world of FETAC, HETAC, FÁS or SOLAS. I am proposing that in this search for what the system world wants educators will not spend all their time in pursuit of clear aims and unambiguous goals, mapping onto qualification frameworks, etc. The search for clear and unambiguous goals is fanciful and an idle search beloved of some educators. It replaces adventure with predictability; replaces complexity with simplicity; replaces ambiguity with clarity; replaces values with measurable outcomes, replaces principles with rules and imagination with facts. Too often, having set goals and objectives allows us to think that our responsibilities are now met as educators, calm is restored, and certainty guaranteed, measurable and quantifiable outcomes are produced for the system. In addition, these goals of course have to be approved and passed, monitored and checked, reviewed and evaluated. Writing rules and regulations and laws does not release us from the constant struggle to do what is moral and principled. This is the business of community education and this is what is called being in charge of history (Freire).

Adult learning is different. It is about being critical of the store of knowledge we received in school, in communities and in society. Asking questions is our business! We are in charge of history. And this involves asking some very critical questions about the past and present so that the future (of which we are in charge) is handed on in good shape. The Ireland we are handing on does not look like the kind of place that has been subject to any kind of critical scrutiny for decades.
Adult education may be the opposite of schooling. That’s a problem too! We try too often to see it as the same – as conforming to goals, objectives, handing on knowledge. It in fact the reconstruction of knowledge, the transforming of knowledge and has a vision of the citizen as active, critical, making systems and people accountable. It is about asking politicians where they got their money, their donations, their contributions, and their support. Politicians must be made answerable to all the citizens and not just to those who with brown envelopes can buy influence and access to power.

Care and respect for traditions is laudable and necessary. Respect for the past is necessary. But as those who are in charge of the future (that’s what I mean by being in charge of history) we have to remake and reconstruct what is not right, what does not fit with our best picture of what a future might be. Adult educators are future workers, in charge of making relationships, communities, families, workplaces and society better places to be more human, more caring, more open to change and more just than previously.

**Violence in community: An agenda for community education**

Of all the things we might want to learn I want to suggest that there is work to be done by adult education across this country in this particular area. There is a serious problem in our society with violence. We live in a violent society. Some time ago now I was asked (with Brid Connolly of NUIM) draw up a Development Plan for one of the local authority areas in Dundalk. We called it *Dundalk United and Divided* (Fleming & Connolly, 1997) because the main finding was that the social glue that held the community together was violence. I have had similar experiences in other communities in Dublin since.

The psychological environment of the community was deeply violent. Violence was seen by many as a response to problems such as drug misuse, misbehaviour, feuds and disputes. Many young people believe that violence is learnt in the home and in the neighbourhood:

> the effect of violence means that the women have very low self-esteem, and don’t have the confidence to assert themselves. The learned coping mechanism is to be very passive, to accept the way of life. This way of coping means that it is virtually impossible for anyone to change their situation without help and support from the community. Activists in this area tell of the complete and utter degradation of family life in a violent household. And the impact on the children is immeasurable.

If prisoners of war were treated the same way as women in domestic violence, there would be an international war tribunal set up to deal with it.

(Fleming & Connolly, 1997, p. 34)

Child agencies say that all violent adults came from violent backgrounds. Boys become violent husbands and fathers. Girls, somehow, form relationships with violent men. Thus the cycle of violence is repeated, generation after generation. Violence is democratic. Children caught up in this cycle come from all walks of life (Fleming & Connolly, 1997, p. 36). It is really important to understand that the experiences of poverty, unemployment and violence are internalised by those experiencing them, leading to a personality that is undermined from within and results in rage and anger. It is vital for men to become more involved in family development, and to move away from traditional male models of violence and domination.
Violence and intimidation as a method of tackling social issues need to be seen as counter productive. Young men in particular, seemed to be very violent. There is violence against women; against children; there is violence on the street; young man against young man; there is the violence of a political nature just as evident in Dublin as in Dundalk (Fleming and Murphy, 2000).

I’m proposing that one of the most important agendas possible in Ireland today is to address the pervasive nature of violence in relationships, in families, in communities, in workplaces, and in society. I mean that educators do have a role in working so that people do not see violence, violations or war as any kind of intelligent response to human problems. If we are willing to teach people to develop job skills, or to grow and develop then it seems to me to be a clear step forward to say that it is a worthwhile project to intervene in the areas of people’s lives where violence makes the most devastating impact. People need to be taught non-violent ways of rearing children, relating to each other as men to men and men to women.

A society is about how we want to live together, about care, justice, love, forming communities that work in democratic ways. We do need to learn how to be just and caring, how to bring about systems that are not only the most efficient but that are the most fair and democratic. We need to learn about history so as not to repeat it, learn poetry so as to express our feelings and learn community studies so that we can live together. All this needs to be learned as adults.

We know now, to our cost and have learned with great pain, how we have not been able to rear all our children in safe, secure, loving and non-violent surroundings. We have not been able in our families, schools, and institutions to protect children from the harsh violent world of our Irish society. In adult education (and in other caring professions) we come across the results of this harsh world. People are not able to learn, they feel undermined and lack confidence, abused, left behind, excluded and not able to voice their contribution. They have been shut-up.

Supporting adults learning is not just a career choice or strategic position or good for business but is responding to the moral imperative that is at the heart of the educational project. There is always more. As the doctor in Camus’s novel The Plague (1960) reflects on the awful events in the city of Oran when the plague;

He knew that the tale he had to tell was not one of final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts,…, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.

(Camus, 1960, 251-252)

We need to teach people to feel indignation and to rebel, to protest, to become active citizens excited to be doing politics in a democracy and not only learning for work but working to learn. This is the still to be realised changed face of education in Ireland.

References