

Heaney's concept of in-between as an epistemological position for PhD research:

A Foreword¹

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The papers in this collection represent contributions made at a recent TCD conference on *Exploring Difference and Diversity in Irish Higher Education* organised by REAMS - the Research into the Education of Adults and Mature Students group and CAVE. Members of REAMS include researchers (many on a PhD track) from other higher education institutions. This conference came about as a result of the experience of a number of REAMS members who felt themselves peripheral when attending conventional research conferences. They formed this group in order to support their own research activities and this hugely supportive and collaborative venture is a welcome development among what I may (because of my age!) call young researchers.

It was a singular honour to be conference rapporteur/speaker and the papers and discussions were loaded with justified ambition and scholarly expertise. These papers and the entire conference contribute to the important national debate about the role of higher education and indeed the entire education project in Ireland. As I write these comments in September following the June conference and in the days following the death of Seamus Heaney I recall some of his poetry not unrelated to the theme of this publication. But more about Heaney later.

The authors in this collection and the other contributors at the conference did not see themselves as insiders engaging in what Loxley has called 'insider research' – though they do have one foot in the system – so to speak. Insider research builds on the advantage of being inside the system that is being researched and has privileged access to data and personnel. But closeness may also hinder a critical investigation because of the loyalty of the insider to the system. This insider label does not describe this group of researchers.

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Neither are they outsider researchers in the way that community groups or researchers from outside the university or HE sector might describe themselves. This outsider position does not have the ease of access of insiders but this leaves outsider researchers free to undertake important and critical studies that are less inhibited by institutional loyalties. This group of researchers is more likely to highlight through qualitative methodologies the narratives and experiences of students. This is in contrast to the tendency of insider researchers to highlight quantitative methodologies that are the currency of systems and institutions.

I suggest that it might be useful to locate the researchers in this collection as 'in-between'. This brings me back to Seamus Heaney because he had the ability in his thinking and poetry to locate himself in an interesting place I want to call 'in-between'. This is not to suggest that researchers might be like the *Inbetweeners* of the TV sit-com series who are neither children nor yet adults. Neither is it a kind of no-man's-land of neutral and unoccupied space. Heaney's in-between is more inclusive and is powerfully expressed in his poetry. For example, in *Terminus* he describes life in his childhood home;

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

And again in *Mossbawn 1 Sunlight* referring to baking scones in the kitchen as a child;

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

Heaney made this in-between space his own. Filled it with possibilities. He occupied the space in-between North and South in Ireland; between Protestant and Catholic; between Irish and British (and indeed a broader global world). He found a space between the chants and rhetoric of each polarity and saw the possibilities of the view from in-between. This did not mean that he was himself in some space that denied his own Irish identity as he objected strongly when he was claimed to be British when included in the *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982). In *An Open Letter* he protested;

Be advised
My passport's green,
No glass of ours was ever raised
To toast the Queen.

This suggest to me that 'in-between' research might be a worthwhile position to explore and inhabit, as indeed the researchers in this collection already do. It is a particularly good position from which to look at equality and diversity. Being neither a part of the establishment nor an outsider but occupying the space 'in-between' so as to expand it into a credible research position. Being peripheral may be an important space to occupy after all! It has the strength of being in the system (though peripheral to it) working on behalf of and with those who seek access to HE. The 'in-between' perspective can navigate between the elite and establishment on the one hand and outsiders on the other. This is not some kind of safe and untrammelled space as anyone knows who has tried to occupy this space - the system oscillates between rejection and co-option. It is similar to a boundary space or as Raymond Williams called it *Border Country* (Williams, 1960). Williams wrote about the border between working class communities and the life of the intellectual. But border may be too linear an image and Heaney's 'in-between' has the image of a space to be occupied.

For example the 'in-between' works in an environment where both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are often mutually exclusive and where quantitative methods dominate because the system defines these methodologies as objective for public policy purposes. The 'in-between' is able to undertake a range of appropriate methodologies and justify and utilise mixed methods, as do many of the researchers in this collection.

One particular argument might be made for this 'in-between' positioning. Most policies, interventions and changes in HE are brought about by the system. Such system interventions are implemented on the basis that the system believes that it understands and knows the problem to be addressed and the programme or project is then designed and put in place based on how the system understands the issue. This is done with minimum input from the student! Very little if any account is taken of how the student (on whose behalf the intervention

is made) might experience the programme. Student voices and narratives are not a part of the project.

One of the most important questions in sociology is being worked out here, that of structure and agency. The most interesting answer to the structure/agency question is found – ‘in-between’. This fits with the ways in which G.H. Mead, Giddens, Habermas, Bourdieu and Honneth have attempted to reconcile these polarities in various ways in recent decades. And the common thread in their efforts is to locate an ‘in-between’ space where structure and agency interact. Habermas in particular was successful in finding a space between the often competing imperatives of the system and lifeworld (Fleming, 2010). His solution was to find ways of expanding the public sphere so that more democratic spaces could be created in which people’s real needs would be identified, expressed and find their way into the system world of the state and public policy (p. 113). In education, the activities of teaching and researching contribute to this. Honneth too allows us suggest that recognition and respect would come to define pedagogy leading to a pedagogy of recognition (Fleming & Finnegan, 2013).

Paulo Freire addressed this concept of in-between when he reconfigured the relationship between teacher and student. When teacher and student together co-investigate social questions and topics they create knowledge that could (most likely) not have been created by each one acting as an individual investigator (researcher). In the other polarities of thinking and doing he called the in-between space *praxis* to indicate that each polarity (thinking/doing, subject/object, theory/practice) was to be understood as being in a dialectical relationship with the other. Such a *praxis* approach to research is the ultimate meaning of ‘in-between’.

At this TCD conference the first question addressed in all workshops was: whether social justice through education was an out-dated idea? It was important for the contributors that education continue to be linked with social justice, with bringing about a fairer and more caring society and that individuals would become more able to bring about democratic ways of living together. But the trend in public discourses is to disconnect education from social justice and link it thoroughly with the market and economic activity as in skill training, training for jobs and

supporting the economy. In this view (an ideology) education is in danger of reducing learning to what Hannah Arendt called a stock of information, simple skills and conformity to a code.

One of the most eloquent images of such a world of neo-liberal free market ideology is provided by *The Great Gatsby* - a Baz Luhrmann (2013) film released at the time of the conference. Gatsby's house in its vulgar pink extravagance is an exemplar of excess. Jay himself is in the 'service of a vast vulgar and meretricious beauty' (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 65) and in his view was about his father's business. At the end of the story, as Gatsby has lost everything, his friends Tom and Daisy Buchanan escape (p. 120);

It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together and let other people clean up the mess they had made....

It is vital that we know what education is for (and what it is against). Education is for peace, democracy, to reduce hatred and address social justice and inequality. And in the neo-liberal world that thrives on inequality, it is difficult to translate this vision into a quality assurance framework that has in recent times replaced educational philosophy with the educational sleep of quality assurance language and its mantras. What is required is not just the following of a particular rule, or procedure or policy but the very activity of philosophy itself which is to think about what we are doing.

It is interesting to note that Enda Delaney in his recent study of the Irish Famine clearly outlined how this liberal free market ideology was implicated in the damage done by the Great Irish Famine in the middle of the 19th century.²

To return to the conference theme of Difference and Diversity it is sufficient now to say that the neo-liberal system thrives on inequality and only embraces difference on that basis. In contrast, the authors in this collection embrace difference as a necessary part of achieving equality and education. Without difference there cannot be learning. So in embracing this difference we do so for totally opposite reasons to that of the dominant free market economy and its state. This

collection is the work of a formidable and impressive cohort of researchers focussing on the inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds in HE and assisting their successful navigation into and through the system.

One of the changes in Irish HE over the recent years has been the opening up of opportunities for many more students to study education at doctoral level. In contrast to previous generations who of necessity had to go abroad to study adult or higher education they now have the advantage of studying in Ireland. It is a distinct advantage to be able to study at home among significantly greater numbers of graduate students. Hundreds now are doctoral students in this field and this should allow supportive and collaborative networks of 'young' researchers to forge solidarities with one another as an antidote to the isolation that can easily impact on the activities of research and writing. But as a small nation there is rarely a critical mass of researchers that can sustain an active programme of conferences and publications as one might find in larger countries. So the historical outward looking activities of previous generations will be continued by this cohort engaging with EU and other international partners in the full range of collaborative activities – all the time making a difference to the education project in Ireland.

These papers are striking in that they illustrate a rich diversity of interests and approaches that are in turn practical, really useful, common sense, policy focussed and some a welcome contribution to high theoretical elaboration. Heaney knew about coming from an Irish background that was more closed than open and what it was like to live in an oppressed and closed culture;

We lived deep in a land of opiate moods,
Under high banked clouds of resignation.

This research cohort might be a catalyst for the expansion of the possibilities offered by access to higher education both to themselves and to those who are availing of HE in this more open access environment. And just like Heaney's words about the arrival of electricity they will also experience what he described as;

And next thing, suddenly, the change of mood.
Books open in the newly wired kitchens.

Young heads that might have dozed a life away
Against the flanks of milking cows were busy
Paving and penciling their first causeways
Across the prescribed texts. The paving stones
Of quadrangles came next and a grammar
Of imperatives, the new age demands.

And later:

Our faith in winning by enduring most
they made anathema, intelligences
brightened and unmannerly as crowbars.

(Heaney, 1987)

The arrival of new researchers in that 'in-between' space can be experienced by the system as unmannerly crowbars, or at least as some kind of threat to be controlled. But the future is theirs, bright and crow-barring institutional rigidities.

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