Imagining Further Education: The Role of Imagination in Education

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Huge demands are being made on education today. As teachers we face a government determined to make, each year, so called ‘savings’ or more correctly cut backs; each one is being asked to do more, teach longer hours and more students for diminishing rewards as more and more jobs get contracted for part-time or casual work. The Further Education sector is facing the challenges of new local Education Boards and the transitions involved in this reconfiguration. The new Training Authority (SOLAS) is also adding to the sense of everything in transition. Huge administrative burdens sap energy. The FE sector finds itself caught between the secondary sector into which it does not fit and another higher/adult sector with which it is more congruent. This gives many in the sector an experience of barely disguised chaos. This is only the tip of the ice-berg as the less well-off in our society continue to bear the burden of bailing out bondholders and rescuing banks. Savage cuts lead to savage inequalities (Kozol, 1991).

In this environment it is difficult to say what education is for, without using the familiar and well-trodden words of inputs, learning outcomes, skills, work, jobs, world class education system preparing students to be workers and consumers. The language of the system (system speak) dominates, compromises our better thoughts and dreams. And it is difficult to change. It is a challenge to think about other things that education might be for and to argue, justify or write about and to work in a classroom for other purposes. Some teachers and educators, some parents and students but mostly commentators, politicians, IBEC, IMF, EU sing the loud chorus that education is for supporting economic activity. In the time we have today I want to search for another language that is more inspiring than the narrow one-dimensional language of managerialism and functionalism.

Education has always had an interest in fairness, justice, democracy and making of choices about the kind of society in which we want to live. Education is vital for the task of making this a better country in which to live (without having to emigrate), in which to rear children, make families, build communities and foster solidarities. We are a society and not just an economy. We are more than the best little country to business in (sic). President Michael D. Higgins frames his protests at these developments as a missing ethical dimension and his speeches on this matter are well worth looking at (Higgins, 2013).

I want to make a number of assumptions and hope you agree with them:

1. We do understand how the economy works and how important it is for supplying our needs – making things, selling things and indeed paying salaries and taxes to redistribute wealth. It is important to have skilled workers. However, public discourse is mostly about a set of ideas that hold that all our needs will be met and our problems solved by the market rather than by politics. We do know now that the banks have gone feral, that banking is a criminalised rogue industry and above all it is the economy that has failed (Giroux, 2012). Or as Olssen (2010, p. 5) has written;

   In relation to education, the provisions of the market proved to be particularly pernicious, for without a reasonable planned approach, one is driven to reliance upon considerations of economic costs and benefits as criteria for the setting of education goals and consequent danger that the determination of educational goals and objectives is taken out of the education realm altogether.

   Education and health care are commodities to be bought and sold – to the highest bidder, for profit. We generally call this economic system neo-liberalism and it emphasises how each individual is in charge of our own lives to make free choices in the market. This emphasis on individuality is a cheap trick to divert attention away from the systemic problems facing us (Giroux, 2012).

2. I am also going to assume, and I hope you agree with me, that the market may not be fair and we do not all come as equals to trade. The market requires inequality and any dream we have of a more equal society is in marked contradiction to that requirement. The public
sphere has been replaced by the market place so that conversations about our problems instead of being a prompt for political debate become a trite ‘talk to Joe’.

3. This assumption is that justice, care, love and democracy are more important than the market and the pursuit of profit. One reason they are more important is because none of these can be bought or sold.

4. Education has a role in all of this. It is important that education continues to be linked with social justice, with bringing about a fairer and more caring society and that graduates 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, supporting the economy and learning how to pass exams rather than to think about what we are doing. In this view (this ideology) education is in danger of reducing learning to what Hannah Arendt called a stock of information, simple skills and conformity to a code.

5. For many years I have taught, spoken about and scribbled in whatever places I could about my own teachers in education: Jack Mezirow on the importance of Transformative Learning and Paulo Freire on critical consciousness. To-day my 5th assumption is that there is a crisis of imagination in education and in the country.

In the midst of savage injustices we seem to be able only to imagine that if we did not implement the awful austeritys everything could have been even worse. We are scarcely able to contemplate how if we had done something different with bondholders, the banks, the builders and the corruption it could have been better. While those who earn least are paying off the national debt, the wealthy implement the cuts and insulate themselves with bonuses and raids on sweet shops. In all of this our language and the ways we speak are in danger of being corrupted too.

This assumption leads me to the theme I have been asked to address - Imagination and Further Education.

Even if you suspect that there is a crisis of imagination in the country, think how difficult it is to make a case for the importance of imagination in education. The Limerick European Year of
Culture controversy may well be a good illustration of how the imagination of the artists is lost, and where the creativity of a community is pitched against a political and administrative elite, a question of imagination versus bums on seats or in this case bums in beds!!

And our current difficulty of finding a language for imagination takes place in a country that is full of imaginative literature, stories and word and poets. Though we have very little great art or architecture (apart from Eileen Gray\(^2\)) or creative use of public spaces\(^3\), we do have great literature and an appreciation of story. But then as another twist to our relationship with art we silenced, banned, and censored almost all our writers for many decades. The church and state colluded to hide the truth of the stories. When I was a student in Maynooth many years ago I remember buying Edna O'Brien’s novels in a mail order book store in Oxford and hiding them under the floor in my room. Literature was dangerous. Theatre was subversive and it has turned out that these writers were telling a great truth (Ferriter, 2009, p. 186). John McGahern (1967) knew something about abuse and was banned. Furtive reading was an attempt to keep alive an ability to imagine how things really were. Similar censorship exists today in public life where ‘the truth’ is equally difficult to extract from public figures – not answering questions they are asked and answering questions they are not asked.

Imagination, as Dewey said, helps us ‘break through the inertia of habit and of habitual thinking’ (Dewey, 1934, p. 272). He proposed teaching for break through moments. Or as Picasso said about painting;

You have to wake people up. To revolutionise their way of identifying things. You’ve got to create images they won’t accept...Force them to understand that they’re living in a pretty queer world. A world that is not reassuring. A world that’s not what they think it is.

(Malraux, 1974, p. 110)

\(^2\) As a remarkable exception see the recent exhibition of Eileen gray at the Irish Museum of Modern Art URL: http://www.imma.ie/en/index.htm
\(^3\) See Irish Architecture Awards for interesting developments. http://www.riai.ie/about/riai_architecture_awards/
But maybe F. Scott Fitzgerald captures it best in *The Great Gatsby*. One of the most eloquent images of a world of neo-liberal free market ideology is provided by *The Great Gatsby* – I’m thinking of the Baz Luhrmann (2013) film released last year. 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 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. History, arts, literature are ways of teaching for breakthrough moments and breaking the inertia of habit. In addition, this year the Hollywood movie *The Wolf of Wall Street* shows the financial elite out of control in a male pursuit of greed, sex, power. The excesses obliterate any sense that society matters.

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. John Dewy offers, in contrast to the promises of the market, education as a ‘conjoint communicated experience’ or a ‘form of associated living’ (Dewey, 1916, pp. 87 & 154). Education and democracy are spoken about in the same language.

In the search for a language of the imagination I am struck by the ability of literature to help us imagine education as it is so often experienced and how it ought to be.
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. 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 saleable 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. Then 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)
These words and ideas are not from psychology, sociology or education but from the fictional world of the imagination.

The current crisis in Ireland is a crisis of imagination! We need less learning to do with the awful ‘flat earth’ thinking described 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 and celebrated as 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 now 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 is 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 further education and this is what Freire called being in charge of history. We are not just custodians of the past but also creators of the future and both need to be imagined.

However, the imagination and literature not only help us to look at how things are, critique the situation as we find it and imagine how it is for others in the schools and classrooms. We are
also prompted to see how things might be or could be different in the future. I am particularly taken with Seamus Heaney’s concept of ‘in-between’.

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 teachers 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 in between warring factions an unoccupied space that no one wants to inhabit. 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.  

(Heaney, 1998, p. 295)

And again in *Mossbawn 1 Sunlight* referring to baking scones in the kitchen as a child with his mother and aunt;

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

(Heaney, 1998, p. 94)

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 the ‘in-between’ teacher might be a worthwhile position from which to explore and inhabit, imagining the teacher as between the system and the student. That space where so many bureaucratic demands and nonsense are visited on the student and that impacts on access, progression and indeed success. To be ‘an in-between worker’ is to be a ‘friend of someone else’s mind’ as they navigate between new knowledge and old; between new learning and old; even new identities and old ones; new possibilities and old rigidities.

Just to be academic about this and prevent anyone thinking that this is a bit fanciful, I suggest that Paulo Freire (1972) also described this in-between space when he reconfigured the relationship between teacher and learning in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. 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. 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 teaching is the ultimate meaning of ‘in-between’.

I am reminded too that Hannah Arendt wrote about the importance of creating an ‘in-between’ among people in dialogue and conversation (1958, p. 182). This happens in classes when people share stories, images, recollections and experiences – a community is created, a democracy of shared dialogues and thoughts.

By coincidence I have just this week read Ansary’s (2012) History of Afghanistan where he defines Afghanistan and its identity as ‘in-between’. In-between Russia and India/Pakistan, Turkey, Persia. ‘This is the land in-between, the land squeezed between mighty powers wrestling for stakes much bigger than Afghanistan’ (p. 343).

However by responding either to students’ needs or those of the system we may have forgotten that teachers and education have a vision too - an imagination that may be different. By following and responding to the demands of students or even their wishes and needs or indeed following the system demands for training, economically useful knowledge and learning
we may be ignoring that long standing tradition that education has an agenda too. By finding ourselves as some kind of neutral facilitator of learning needs we may be in danger of leaving a gap that will be filled by cheerleaders and fakes whose chorus is more about growth, prosperity, wealth creation, entrepreneurship and that always finding places on Governing Authorities of HE institutions for the Captains of Industry.

The challenge is to imagine a world where everything is measured but not everything can be measured. To imagine how each student’s needs for growth and development the kind of recognition and respect. One hopes that these moments are imagined as important, loaded with recognition; but they cannot be timetabled, set out in a curriculum – they are the curriculum – they cannot be assessed, tracked, funded, tested.

But they can be imagined by the teacher who is careful enough to imagine that this moment might be the one that is remembered. All children who leave school early (we deal with so many of them in FE) tell of one teacher who was key in the decision, who was the one who misunderstood or caught them in the wrong and finally became the straw that broke the camel’s back, so to speak (Fleming & Murphy, 2000). But all children who leave school early also tell of the one teacher who was kind. They remember the moment someone made a difference, who understood them and recognised them.

So what is required then is a new language that we can imagine that speaks of other things and values apart from skills and jobs and economic development. We are looking for a vision of education that you could hang your hat on and feel that it was not full of system speak, fake accountability and a false promise that there are jobs for those who only train.

Let me try to convince you with one more story. I am reminded of Brian Friel’s play Dancing at Lughnasa (1990) where the women spontaneously break out into dancing. There are few moments like it in theatre. What does this mean? In the play Michael tells his story of a summer in Ballybay with his mother, four aunts and an uncle back from the missions in Africa. He opens the play (Friel, 1990, p. 1) with the invitation to remember;

When I cast my mind back to the summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me. We got our first wireless set that summer – well a sort of set; and it
Having told the story of the summer, in which Michael's father was an unreliable and infrequent visitor, his mother and he were disappointed in this. One aunt was unlucky in love, another lost her job as a teacher, two aunts left home and were never heard of again. This is not to mention his uncle back from the African missions more African than the Africans themselves. But the final words of the play may be insightful about the dancing:

But in all of this Michael recalls, at the end of the play (Friel, 1990, p.55-56), what he remembers:

> And so when I cast my mind back to the summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me. But there is one memory of that Lughnasa time that visits me most often; and what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory...And what is so strange about that memory is that everybody seems to be floating on those sweet sounds, moving rhythmically, languourously, in complete isolation; responding more to the mood of the music than to its beat. When I remember it I think of it as dancing.

(Friel, 1990, pp. 55-56)

All I can ask is whether you prefer to speak of education, and teaching and providing opportunities for students in this language that just might move a person to break through the congealed thoughts and break with the habitual ways of thinking and acting or whether you would like to argue for a language of system speak and outcomes

- Predictable, competent, computerized
- Whirring unheard in measured achievement
- Of programmed next steps
- Outcomes anticipated, calibrated
- Premises intact
- No doubts, debts, dreams.

(Mezirow, 1994)

I know you are going to agree with me and because of that we might recall how Seamus Heaney imagined this new learning (he was talking about the power of rural electrification!):

> 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 pencilling 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, 1998, pp. 319-320)

This is no dainty dance, no Riverdance with its fancy footwork but an attempt to reconfigure power and remake the world. Further education is no less that this.

References
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