

Literacy for Today and Tomorrow: Read the World and Write History¹

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Exactly 50 years ago I was asked by Waterford RTC to teach Sociology and Psychology on the continuing education programme (1974-1975). That experience (and others) prompted me to go study adult education. It was impossible to do this in Ireland at masters and doctoral level so off to Mezirow in TC. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, you have created something unique and innovative and of huge significance for SE. A university for the South East was made possible with the work of the adult education venture of WIT. Just as its name has changed over the years maybe it will do so again. How about Ollscoil na nDeise!

I was born in Waterford. I lived in one of the three-story houses on the corner of The Manor and Bath Street. On the other corners were, The Walsh House (more well-off older residents); the Mathew Shea Institute (lease well off older folk); and the Good Shepherd Convent, care home for girls, and the Magdalene Laundry. There were years when I was in that building every day, had meals there and was always innocently jealous of the great fun the children had in their great play ground that we as children could see from our upstairs windows. It is an honour to be invited back for the first time to speak at TUSE.

But one memory haunts me from those years. I was about 5. My mum took me shopping after school. It was dark and raining. So maybe November. I had friends at school. Tommie XXXXX and another boy from Castle Street – call him Tommie Smith. Just as we were going into Walter Dower's pub at the Car Stand, where *The Lounge* is today, I saw my friend Tommie Smith, sitting on the step. He was selling newspapers. He had no shoes. It was my first lesson in sociology. I knew about and learned about poverty, poor housing, really poor housing, sickness,

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pandemics – TB and polio – children died. And from the Christian Brothers I learned that education was a violent encounter between teachers and boys. The three Fleming brothers could sort out the playground violence. But being smart at school was a powerful antidote to the institutionalized beatings that were part of every day in the Manor and later in Mount Sion.

When am I telling you this? Only one reason, really. Experience drives learning. The experiences we have prompt our learning and learning is the search for meaning. The ideas we have and the theories we hold are embedded in our lived experience (Fleming, 2023). Education is the reconstruction of experience (John Dewey says) and as adult educators we bring experiences to class. And Freire said it well when he said that in adult education, we take what we know already and come to know it in a different way....more critically, more systematically, more theoretically....and so on. And adult education always offers a way forward, a system that does not punish but recognises the unique experience of each learner.

One more reason for why I am telling you these stories. Hannah Arendt (2018) held that rigorous thinking should be grounded in lived experience – in her case it was her experience of being a Jew in Europe, arriving in New York as a stateless person:

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. (p. 200)

Students think out of their own experience and they should be taught to think out of their own experience.

All of this is in line with current trends in society and in adult education. This is the age of experience. People today phone into radio stations (Talk to Joe), into WLR to share stories about what happens. The stories can be detailed, personal and for some too revealing. It is difficult to argue that someone's experience is not relevant.

When students write assignments or theses, individual, subjective experiences are researched and given power, validation and status that these subjective accounts did not have in previous decades. Some journal articles or theses research the experience of one person – in

contrast to the demand for objectivity that informed previous times. Narratives, stories and unique experiences lead me to suggest that we live in an age of experience – or in more academic language, in an age of subjectivity.

Adult education practices encourage narratives and they are given a great deal of unquestioned authority. Psychology, counselling, facilitating, all deal with what I call this: the psychological imagination.

While fore-fronting this psychological imagination a range of conversations are encouraged and indeed a whole range of facilitation skills are learned and practiced so that the personal meanings – the psychological meaning of experiences – are highlighted and fore fronted and interpreted and talked through to closure.

What may be under used and under-appreciated is what's called the sociological imagination. I hope you will agree, that in much of the approach to literacy and basic education and FE or whatever the version of adult education you mention the sociological imagination is not the main ingredient. This is most true when the basic skills of reading and writing are to the fore and the emphasis is on skills. This is the functional imagination. If only people can read and write, the lifelong learning policy mantra assumes that all else will follow, skills training, jobs and so on. This is of course not the vision supported by the Literacy Development Centre at TUSE. Literacy helps us read the world too. This is partly what I mean by the sociological imagination – reading the world.

So, what is this sociological imagination? It is a way of studying and understanding the connections between our experiences and the broader social systems and structures. Who are the proponents of this approach? C Wright Mills (*The Sociological Imagination*), Alfred Schutz (*Phenomenology and Social Relations*) and most importantly for us as we address literacy, Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

Give an example? I remember wanting to talk about coffee shops in Larissa – a city in Greece where I work on a Learning City project. I wanted to discuss coffee shops because Larissa is famous for the sheer number of coffee shops – now a Coffee Festival. In the group meeting (>100) one person said this: “if you think we have a lot of coffee shops, you should see the number of pharmacies...” This was an invitation to do just that and discussion led to how

many people were on various kinds of medications for a wide range of conditions....the medical model, the use of pharmaceuticals was quickly on the agenda. In Ardkeen/Kilkohan: statins; blood pressure medications; gastric acid reductions are the top prescribed medications. How is this list different for free medical patients? For men? For women? What surprises you? (S.I at work). We began to learn things neither they nor I could have prompted on our own.

The government policy on jobs creation that targeted pharmaceutical and computer manufacturing, impacts each individual and how they experience the world of work. Most of the wealth in Ireland is created by these plus tourism and agriculture/food production. The demand for trained, skilled and qualified workers has transformed the educational landscape in Ireland. So too has free secondary education and the progressive development of FE and HE across the country. The political is personal. The institutional is personal. This the flip side of the feminist mantra: the personal is political (Honneth, 1995). The sociological imagination shows how the political is personal. You could argue that much of the educational interventions following the Investment in Education report of the 1960 failed as literacy levels remained then and now remarkably resistant to being solved.

The OECD Adult Skills Survey shows about 1 in 6, Irish adults are at or below level 1 on a five level literacy scale. At this level a person may be unable to understand basic written information.

25% or 1 in 4 Irish adults score at or below level 1 for numeracy. At this level a person may struggle with doing simple math calculations.

42% of Irish adults score at or below level 1 on using technology to solve problems and accomplish tasks.

For this survey the Central Statistic Office (CSO) assessed 6,000 people aged 16 – 65 in Ireland. The survey was done in 2012 and the results were announced in 2013.

1. Why is the sociological imagination so important? Without it, the entire social system will operate anyway, but behind our backs, and we will be increasingly left to understand our own experiences within the bounds of psychology alone and pursue individual meanings. Surely this is loading too much weight on the

backs of literacy teachers and students? So, ask the question this way? Are our students entitled to access the entire range of knowledge that is possible to learn? Why should we only give access to knowledge that leads to the ability to read and write and work? Because there is more. And adults have a right to access the entire range of knowledge to which anybody else has access. That's the first reason.

2. The second reason is that adults have curiosities and questions and stuff they wished they had learned before now. They have a right to this knowledge too.
3. The third reason is that in order to be a full member of society we need access to the full range of complex knowledge that is required to even to survive, in the world today. Some will focus on what is called digital literacy or whatever iteration of this is a trigger for funding and validation of what we do in the university. But there is always more.

The Marriage Equality Referendum in 2015 was a moment from which we can learn a great deal. The state has now given recognition to diverse ways of relating and relationships and in that moment, you could see how the celebrations that 'kicked off' were expressions of how validated so many individual families and their members felt by this national recognition. Recognition is sought not just by children but by every adult in families, in work and under the law. Recognition is developmental. The political is personal (not only is the personal political). We grow as individuals and as a society. Adult education provides recognition.

As a result of recognition events such as this one today are also institutional moments of recognition that have profound impact on those who are recognised. Learners and teachers and institutions get together to recognise the learning, the skills, the achievements, the qualifications, the success, and the goals reached and targets achieved. However, moments like this go much further. We recognise the curiosities, the questions, the intelligence, the missed opportunities that are no fault of those who missed out on learning first time round, the lifelong learning and the future potential of learned students. It recognises people. [I remember meeting the parents of a PhD student at graduation...."very emotional"]. It is social capital that is spread around families, neighbours and the entire community in incremental and small step

that when all are put together, they become giant steps. Such recognition itself is developmental, that's how we grow.

Does being a university change any of this? Let me suggest that along with all the other things a university does, especially research (where new knowledge is created), a university above all else in interacting with its students teaches people to think, reflect, critique, think for themselves and grasp the full complexity of the Magdalene Laundry experience and use that knowledge to make decisions that are hugely important for themselves, their children, in a world where covid, climate change, wars all challenge our ability to think clearly and usefully under pressure. I am not forgetting the serious informed decisions parents must make every day! Refugees challenge our thinking today.

So, I have argued myself into a position where I am suggesting that literacy is a way of teaching our students to think. And to act in ways that reflect that thinking. Now that's literacy. Read the World and Make History. If we want to teach people to think, what thoughts do we want them to think? – if you get my question. If you are reflecting on experience what is the nature of that reflection? If reflecting on our experience is learning, what thoughts ought we have or what kind of thinking should we engage in?

Whether you call it critical thinking, transformative learning, critical pedagogy or other names...all point to ways in which it is important to learn how the big systems of society, history, economics, politics, religion, etc are connected to our experience and make us see the world in particular ways, act in particular ways and feel in specific ways. Even our intuitions do not escape.

For Sociological Imagination there are a number of ingredients;

1. To hold a number of points of view in your mind at the same time, that may be mutually exclusive. This is difficult in a world that wants clarity, and sees many conflicting positions in terms of black or white or simplistic ways. One is in favour of the Palestinian position. It seems that one is precluded from seeing the argument from both sides. Protests at CU, where students are caught in narrow or closed binaries.

2. Another obvious one is to be able to make important distinctions, e.g., to criticise what the State of Israel does is not necessarily anti-Semitic. Some think it is. It can be. Think of holding such contradictory positions with regard to NI?
3. Thinking in this critical way takes time, and is not always easy in a world that requires rapid answers. This is especially true in this COVID era (or climate change) as governments, health systems, care facilities, parents must make important decisions on the basis of knowledge that is only emerging and provisional. We flattened the curve – bringing to mind that the same number of people get COVID, just not as many at the same time. Other things we learned: T-Cells, quarantine, social distancing; mRNA, and so on. We forget much too. How many dies? Who died?

All knowledge is provisional.

Knowing is a collaborative activity. [Coffee shops in Larissa.....pharmacy in Larissa].

Respecting other positions can also refer to the disciplines that are necessary to understand reality, e.g. economics, psychology, history, politics, sociology, etc.

Values are important. The value we give to others and their points of view and experiences.

Asking questions, seeking answering. Systematic thinking.

Making decisions that are always provisional and open to change in the future;

Such thinking is learned and taught.

We need more than ever an analysis of where we are now and an ability to teach people so see clearly how society really is [where are the Gas House lanes today?] and how it operates in the interests of the few and keeps lower social groups paying for the folly and corruption of the multinational institutions whether it is the banking system, land developers, health reforms that disguise cuts in service, or multinational tax evaders. The neoliberal culture and economics want to define education by reducing it to teaching the kind of learning and researching the kind of knowledge that is useful not just for work skills but that affirms and supports the status quo. The market will provide (Fleming, 2024). In *Daring to Dream* Ana Maria Freire says that the neoliberal economy;

Speaks about the need for unemployment, for poverty, for inequality. I feel it is our duty to fight against such fatalistic mechanical forms of comprehending history...if we allow ourselves to fall for the trickery of neoliberal economic discourses, which affirm realities of homelessness and poverty as inevitable, then opposition for change becomes invisible, and our role in fostering change becomes absent. (Freire, 2007, p. 4)

What responsibility rests on the teacher of critical pedagogy? What skills are needed to teach? Above all it is the responsibility of teachers – much as we would like our students to be lifelong learners – it is teachers who must become always lifelong learners. Reading, thinking, reading, studying, CPD. Gathering resources.

I would love to teach a class on Bambie Thug (2024) and the Eurovision Song 'Doomsday'. SO much going on there: words, images, sounds, gestures, self-presentation, make-up, gender fluidity, love, disloyalty, loyalty, cosmic, Celtic forces and themes, The Cranberries.....etc.

Music also has the ability to name the world (Freire, 1970). In his autobiography Bruce Springsteen (2016) captures this (Kokkos & Fleming, 2024). He writes: “[Bob] Dylan had deftly melded the political and personal in a way that added resonance and power to both. I agreed the political is personal and vice versa” (2016, p. 327). In more detail (p. 294) he writes:

In my writing I was increasingly interested in the place where “This Land is Your Land” and “The River” intersected, where the political and personal came together to spill clear water in to the muddy river of history.... I thought perhaps mapping that territory, the distance between the American dream and the American reality, might be my service.... I hoped it might give roots and mission to our band....

The Celtic imagination or the Irish imagination is not as often relied upon to inform our teaching. Or if it is, our teachers are not writing about it! We are a nation of rich imaginations especially in words. Art, stories, poetry, fiction, always collecting resources.

Useful ideas?

I do think our Irish literature has not been fully exploited in our classrooms.

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.

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 sociological imagining. It is in sharp contrast to the functional, instrumental world of 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 met as educators when objectives are reached; 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, evaluated and quality assured. 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 adult literacy 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, argued for and created.

The history of adult education emerges from a desire to respond to the inherited disadvantages of the system, whether a result of disadvantage in society in general or in the school system in particular. There were those 'left behind'. This had economic, social, personal, health and well-being consequences. Adult education is good for mental and physical well-being. It is part of the social fabric or connective tissue of a functioning society and especially civil society. Democracy and education presuppose each other. Without education there cannot

be democracy. John Dewey was so clear about this that he described democracy and education as a conjoined way of living together (Finnegan, & Fleming, 2023).

In Ireland for many years 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 from Oxford (well before Amazon) 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. What stories are not allowed to be asked today?

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)

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. 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....

Explore how the movie *Oppenheimer* ignores the intellectual contribution of women in the Manhattan project.

But the agenda of the neo-liberal commodification of everything always tries to colonize this area of civil society and hollowed out peoples desires to learn, their curiosity and imagination and replaces it with training and the illusion that there are jobs for everybody. This is the main tension in adult education. There has been a remarkable experience in Ireland of our field having been recognised by the state and understood that adult education makes a valued contribution to the public good of society. This has led to funded initiatives, Travellers Workshops, VTOS, Literacy and Community Education, Literacy Organizers, Guidance Counselling, Youthreach, BTEI, Community Workers and Organizers, etc. etc. All of this is to be celebrated. But a more clever and insightful perspective is required.

Do not be seduced by the version of LLL that is in command.

What is it about education that allows us escape the trap of the total and blind emphasis on skills? How can we argue in fresh and convincing ways so that we and they do not stay in the closed box of instrumental learning?

This is what I want to do for the remainder of the time we have together.

1. Understand what education is and how it is more than skills;
2. Learn to argue that training alone is not education;
3. Adults have a right to learn all that it is possible to learn;
4. In ways and in situations that are conducive to their ways of learning and financial situation;
5. That democracy, equality, care, justice, fairness all require learning and are not skills;
6. That education is a pre-requisite for a democracy, for a republic;
7. A republic must be learned;
8. That we can measure the benefits of all learning;
9. That many social problems can be best understood and actions agreed through education (the environmental disaster is really only capable of being addressed through education)
10. Government has a responsibility to support civil society;
11. Adult education is a sound investment.

Sea Prayer by Khaled Hosseini [author of *The Kite Runner*], inspired by Alan Kurdi.

In-between workers

This is no easy task. I suggest that it might be useful to locate the professional in this 'in-between' space. Seamus Heaney had in his thinking and poetry to locate himself in an interesting place I want to call 'in-between'. This is not to suggest that professionals might be in 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.

(Heaney, 1998, p. 295)

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, 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 suggests to me that professionals might see themselves as an 'in-betweenener'. This might be a worthwhile position to explore and inhabit. It is a particularly good position from which to look at equality and diversity and at the conflicting demands of training for work over against educating for living. Being neither a part of the establishment nor an outsider but occupying the space 'in-between' so as to expand it into a credible professional 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.

There is an in-between when we think of the old learning the student must leave behind and the new learning and knowledge. The 'in-between' perspective can navigate between the elite and establishment on the one hand and outsiders on the other – the system and the student, the labour market and the exciting possibilities of real lifelong learning. This is not some kind of safe and untrammelled space. This is no sitting on the fence. As anyone knows who has tried to occupy this space - the system oscillates between rejection and co-option. This

is no border country or boundary space. A border may be too linear an image and Heaney's 'in-between' has the image of a space to be occupied. An adult education project in a university makes this in-between-ness its own. It is in the university with one big foot. It is outside the university with another big foot and it makes this space viable, of interest to insiders and outsiders. A useful space for the institution that needs this community perspective. Adult education has a dual mandate.

For example, the 'in-between' works in an environment where both training and education are often mutually exclusive and where training often dominates because the system defines these priorities as good for public purposes. They become the public good. The 'in-between' is able to undertake a range of appropriate modules, teaching methods, subjects, pedagogies and justify and utilise education methods.

One particular argument might be made for this 'in-between' positioning. Most policies, interventions and changes in HE are brought about by the system (Fleming, & Finnegan, 2014). 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! – until now! 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.

What is education for?

It is vital that we know what education is for (and what it is against). Education is for peace, democracy, the common good, to reduce hatred and address social justice and inequality, to make a better society, for freedom and not just freedom from unemployment. 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.

The economy offers jobs. Training offers skills. Education offers freedom through the sociological imagination.

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 new 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, a mini-democracy where dialogue and critique presuppose each other.

However, by responding either to students' needs or those of the system we may have forgotten that teachers and educators 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 a distinguished 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. How can a graduation ceremony or an event such as this connect education and learning with the making of a republic. What is a republic?

The challenge is to imagine a world where everything is supposed to be measured but not everything can be measured. 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 literacy provision) 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 obsessed us.

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, languorously, 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)

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 optative moods,
under high, banked clouds of resignation.

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 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 make the world a better place and write history and lead to emancipation and freedom and remake the world. Literacy is no less than this.

The free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wings
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with fearful trill
of the things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied

so he opens his throat to sing

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou

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