

Education as a Public Good¹

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The birds they sang
At the break of day
Start again,
I heard them say,
Don't dwell on what
Has passed away
Or what is yet to be.

The wars they will
Be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
Bought and sold
And bought again;
The dove is never free.

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack, a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.*

(L. Cohen in Faggen, 1993, p. 188)

How can we see more clearly what is happening in adult education and further education and training in Ireland (FET)? If you like what the policy people have done to the health system, you will undoubtedly like what they are doing to education. However you allocate responsibility for this, to the government, to politicians it is clear that the process is driven by a very particular set of priorities. If we could get a handle on what this is we might be able to understand what is happening.

Neoliberalism

The market has taken over the state and this has consequences. That is what is happening. Housing for instance is a good example. Forgetting the medium term history of the Celtic Tiger and its collapse, the government has tried to rescue banks and builders and hopes that they will solve the homeless crisis. It will not. No amount of grants and tax incentives will make the situation much better. Until then, thousands will remain homeless, trollies will mount in hospitals and the market will continue to profit.

There is a great coalition in favour of making money, reducing taxes, rubbishing the public service, lowering costs and preventing policy makers from identifying the real causes of a number of crises.

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Globalization, reducing regulation, privatization and workforce flexibility are the values of this system. This coalition also avoids any responsibility for creating a more fair or caring society, for teaching democracy or citizenship values. It avoids any mention of critical citizenship or teaching people to ask questions especially ones that are critical of the system. This, in spite of the fact that asking questions may be the defining characteristic of a citizen in a democratic republic.

I don't want to spend any significant amount of time naming this system. Because it already has a name: Neo-liberalism. It holds that the market will address all our needs. In association with this it wants to support a cultural revolution in which we become customers, workers, clients and functionaries. Education is part of the system and gets reduced to training. Almost every public policy is designed to support the economy. There is now considerable research, scholarship and understanding of this and authors such as Harvey, Giroux and in Ireland Kirby, Allen, and O'Hearn have outlined the Irish variation of this neo-liberalism. Fergal Finnegan (2008) has outlined this in a recent edition of *The Adult Learner*. [This is your own journal and for many years it has provided an important service to adult education in Ireland. The Adult Education Organisers and now Officers supported this with members of the Editorial Board especially Liam Bane, Kathleen Forde and Eileen Curtis]

I am going to make a number of suggestions throughout this time that are designed to support AEOs as you work within this system and attempt to address its challenges:

Reading and studying are central to continuous professional development. This is an important element of your survival skills in this world of rapid change and reconstruction and destruction. You will need to keep your mind honed on the agenda and keep in touch with how others perceive what is happening.

New forms of management called managerialism have taken over parts of our social lives that previously were not part of the market place but resided happily in what you and I call civil society. For example: The national lottery took much of the fundraising capacity of civil society and turned it into a private business with some involvement by An Post but mostly Camelot and the Canadian Teachers Union. It is a profit making operation that benefits the owners, good causes. These causes are identified by the state.

In the process the State has been hollowed out (Finnegan, 2008), a term used to describe its reduced function as a force for redistribution of wealth and supplier of public services, welfare with an interest in the public good. Instead it has become a pawn of the economy. Unaccountable centres of power dominate, unaccountable to democratic control. The task of neo-liberalism is to redistribute power and wealth and make that process acceptable as 'common sense' as in: the survival of the fittest, the rewards for those who get up in the morning to go to work, there is no alternative! All of these are mantras of the neoliberal system.

The consequences include an acceptance of inequality, even it is necessity. The public good is replaced by self-interest. Homelessness is either bad luck or a personal weakness or failure. Not being able to read or write is similarly defined.

There are significant consequences for education and in our case for FET. Lifelong learning (LLL) is defined to a great extent as an ally of this system. But there are versions of LLL that are not so restricted to training, skills, measurable outcomes and the relentless restructurings you are undergoing at this moment.

Ireland is Neoliberal with a Twist

We could argue that in Ireland we have adopted neo-liberalism (for now) with a twist. The twist involves a strong sense of watering down the worst excesses in order for government to remain popular. It may involve a dash of the Irish 'being against things' like big business, government, not buying into the entire culture of consumerism, and even managerialism...a bit too much laissez-faire and resistant to living for work alone.

Mise Éire: Sine mé ná an Chailleach Bhéarra

Mór mo ghlóir: Mé a rug Cú Chulainn cróga.

Mór mo náir: Mo chlann féin a dhíol a máthair.

Mór mo phian: Bithnaimhde do mo shíorchípadh.

Mór mo bhrón: D'éag an dream inar chuireas dóchas.

Mise Éire: Uaigní mé ná an Chailleach Bhéarra.

I am Ireland:

I am older than the Hag of Beara

Great my glory:

I who bore brave Cuchulainn.

Great my shame:

My own children that sold their mother.

Great my pain:

My irreconcilable enemies who harass me continually.

Great my sorrow:

That crowd, in whom I placed my trust, decayed.

I am Ireland:

I am lonelier than the Hag of Beara

(Pearse, 1917)

Social inclusion and citizenship as concepts still carry social value. The success in preventing the Government privatizing Irish Water is a good example of how the worse impulses of neo-liberalism were not followed.

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.

Neo-liberalism 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).

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 there. The market requires inequality and any dream we have of a more equal society is in marked contradiction to that requirement. The public good has been replaced by what is good for the market so that conversations about our problems instead of being a prompt for political debate become a trite 'talk to Joe'.

I assume that justice, care, love and democracy are more important than the market and the pursuit of profit.

Education and the Public Good

Education has a role in all of this, both as it is implicated and has potential for addressing problems in the social system. It is important that education continues to be linked with social justice, with bringing about a fairer and more caring society. 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. Even if it is QQI assured.

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, the world of the imagination.

The current crisis in Ireland is to a great extent 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 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, 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 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, argued for and created.

Everybody knows that the dice are loaded
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed
Everybody knows the war is over
Everybody knows the good guys lost
Everybody knows the fight was fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich

That's how it goes
Everybody knows

(L. Cohen in Faggen, 1993, p.188).

An Adult Education Perspective

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.

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.

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....

But the agenda of the neo-liberal commodification of everything always tries to colonize this area of civil society and Hoover up 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, FET, Education and Training Boards. 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.

The ability to argue for an alternative or a more inclusive response than the functional one proposed by Government is a most important ability. The main supporting idea I want to emphasise is the 'education' remains in many titles Education and Training Boards.

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?

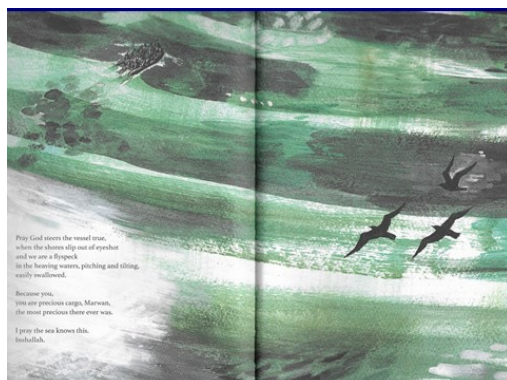
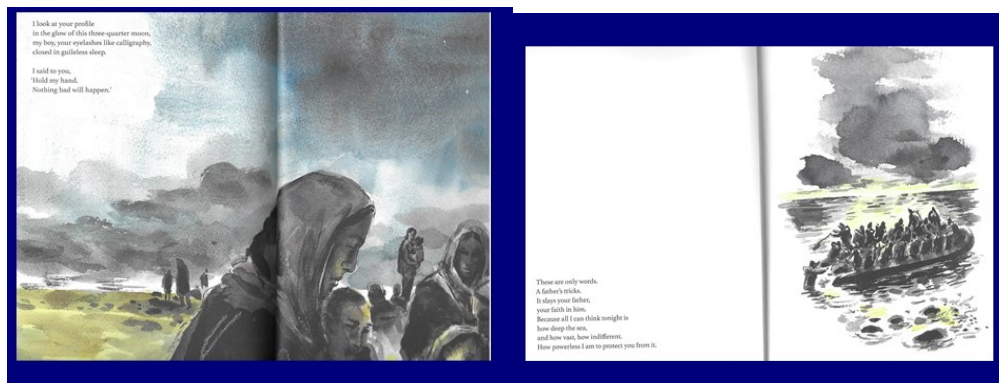
This is what I want to do for the remainder of the time we have together.

- Understand what education is and how it is more than skills;
- Learn to argue that training alone is not education;
- Adults have a right to learn all that it is possible to learn;
- In ways and in situations that are conducive to their ways of learning and financial situation;
- That democracy, equality, care, justice, fairness all require learning and are not skills;
- That education is a pre-requisite for a democracy, for a republic;
- That we can measure the benefits of all learning;
- 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)
- Government has a responsibility to support civil society;
- Adult education is a sound investment.

My own preference is to see many situations as teaching moments....like today.

Argue with head and heart

Sea Prayer by Khaled Hosseini (Hosseini, 2018) [author of *The Kite Runner*], inspired by Alan Kurdi.



These are only words.
A father's tricks.
It dyes your father,
your faith in him.
Because all I can think tonight is
how deep the sea,
and how vast, how indifferent.
How powerless I am to protect you from it.

(Hosseini, 2018)

This publication shows how other arguments can be made besides those of the rational and of the head. It is a useful way of making a case for child care and parenting education that is not about work, jobs, skills but about teaching for relationship....

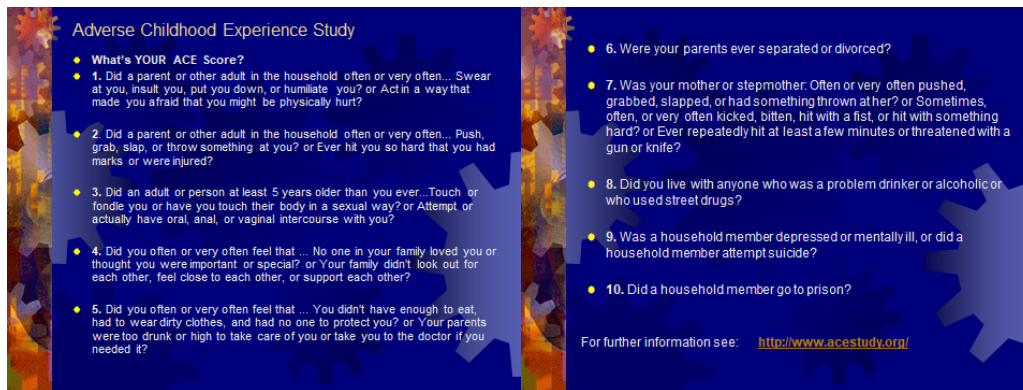
Everybody knows the fight was fixed:
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich.
That's how it goes.
Everybody knows.

Everybody knows that the boat is leaking.
Everybody knows that the captain lied.

(L. Cohen in Faggen, p. 178)

Learner Proof courses....define learning is a most holistic way, argue for it, include it everywhere, stick to your convictions, convince. Argue how education requiresArgue with cogent and quotable references to Dewey, Freire, and any others you know. Peter Jarvis has died this week.

Adverse Childhood Experience Research



(Felitti, et al., 1998)

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 the professional might see themselves as an 'in-between-er'. 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 FE. 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. Everybody knows! 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.

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 FE 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! – 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.

Remember the ESRI report (Kelly, et al., 2015) that studied CE, BTEI and jobBridge on which €199.5m were spent and processed 25,000 students in the most recent year. It found that these labour market activation measures delivered and reduced peoples chance of work. As part of the grand experiment it had a control group and another group that got education. It called this group the treatment group. Everybody knows!

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.

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.

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.

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 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 obsessed us.

(Friel, 1990)

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 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 education both to themselves and to those who are availing of FE 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)

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 than this.

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