**Working with Adults: Challenges and Possibilities in Further Education[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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Thank you for this invitation to meet you here in Donegal. Thank you to Cróna and your team and especially for the warm hospitality at Donegal E&T Board. I also want to welcome the opportunity to share a platform with my colleagues. We have worked on the same events previously but we had to come to Donegal to share a platform. It’s Different up here!

I have been asked to talk to you about working with adults because, even thought everybody here may not be a teacher or in more modern fashion a facilitator, everybody I understand works with adults.

Everything I do today, I am doing as someone who works with adults and in every detail I am going to try model, as well as talk about, how I understand and practice this working with adults. I will try to engage with you in ways that are complex and layered rather than in straight lines – as a way of illustrating how working with adults is not always done with the clarity and linear goals of prescribed teaching. Working with adults in education is a relationship between hearts and minds, often poorly facilitated by technology.

1 I have been reading, or more correctly my wife has been reading ***Atlas of the Irish Revolution*** and as usual I benefit from her research (it is not unusual for learning to be embedded in a relationship and we do not mention often enough how our most important learnings are a result of such meetings of minds and hearts). Anyway by page 11 of the book it was clear that *it is different in Donegal!* Numerous maps show how it is different here. It is not always north – or south – or even East or West:

The number of mass goers

The lower rate of decline in farm holdings here

Fewer deaths from the mid-19th century famine

Least number of townlands auctioned in the 19th cent.

[current levels of emigration? In ten years 2010 – 2018 over 700,000 emigrated and even more arrived in Ireland – these are major migrations of people that we rarely talk about but they must have some significance and consequences. These movements are twice the numbers that complete secondary school each year.]

I’m not suggesting these differences are good or bad but only that geography plays a crucial role in understanding an area and influencing its development.

2 The **Thomas Cooke Travel company** collapsed last week. Thousands of jobs were lost mostly as a result of automation. High Street stores, hotel works, air crew and ground staff. Google maps, Skyscanner and algorithms have undermined traditional jobs and created fewer and very different kinds of jobs with different skills and qualities required in **different locations.** These changes too have different consequences in Donegal. It is different in Donegal!

3. I have been looking at the **Kinsey Report** *The Future of Work in America* (Lund, et al., 2019). What has that to do with us here? One finding is clear: Economic development in so far as it is influenced by automation is going to follow the big cities and the already big towns. Higher salaries, better resources and the wealthy, the educated and the young will gravitate to the main centres of population. Those who have get! The economic outcomes for other centres and rural areas will inevitably be different, more small industries, different population and education profiles, different wage earnings and education. Older people, niche businesses, health care and hospitality including tourism are all concentrated in less central areas. Tourism, fishing, food may be the great industries of our less central areas. Better broadband is the new M17 of the Saw Doctors. It is going to continue to be different.

4 In the recent **Supreme Court Case** in London concerning the prorogation of parliament where the decision of the Scottish Court was appealed, the argument of the Scottish side was based to a great extent on the fact that it is Different in Scotland. The case argued that the perspective from Edinburgh was an important one. It allowed the case to be made that when you see things differently, (in Scotland) it allows a more contextualized view. This concept of difference is key for Equality Debate. This country needs the different perspective one gets from Donegal. Recognition of this difference and its value is an equality issue for the nation.

5. I recently found in our attic some well-used primary school textbooks from the 1950s[[2]](#footnote-2). Among them was **Ó Duirinne’s *Tír na hÉireann****: Leabhar ar Ṫir-eolas ár dTíre féin (The Country of Ireland: A Book on the Geography* *of our own Country).* Its first sentence asks the reader to look at a map of Europe where you see two islands beyond the mainland. The smallest and furthest out is Ireland - “*ár dtír féin*”(p. 5). It states that there is no land that gets in the way of ships going back and forth to America across the busiest trade route in the world (sic). The key phrase is “*ár dtír féin*” (our own country). This school book in Irish was part of a remarkable project of nation-building with its strong self-images and national pride. Following the disastrous Economic War of the 1930s and the World War of the 1940s it was time to build “*ár dtír féin*”.

It came as a shock to the system when the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) produced empirical evidence of low literacy levels in Ireland (Morgan, et al., 1997). There were 500,000 people unable to read the instructions on a box of Aspirin. Many resulting educational interventions have been successful - to a point. Though well-intended these policies have had mixed results. Some people have been left behind.

Literacy is still a priority in further education (FE) courses and is an important piece of the learning landscape as Ireland continues to plot its development as an economy. This is proposed knowing that education is highly valued in our society as a way of enhancing social and economic mobility.

Literacy involves an ability to read and write a range of typical and functional texts but in adult education theory and practice literacy has a broader definition. It is understood as the ability to engage in contextualized debates and read in ways that are more than functional and focussed on the requirements of a job. Reading may involve understanding how society is structured and organized. This reading involves being able to understand that behind “common sense” ways of seeing the world there are more critical and layered meanings. The ability to ask questions, especially about how power is exercised, is an example of what is called reading the world (thinking of Paulo Freire here). One can read or understand global warming in a way that might lead one to think of actions that one might take as an individual, as a community or as a society. This is a form of literacy.

This kind of literacy is not just a matter of decoding the string of letters in a word or the meanings of words in a sentence. It is a matter of decoding context. It is about the matrix of things referred to in a text and things implied by it. For example, take this sentence about the Land League: “it was a struggle for farming land in 19th century Ireland and was about security of tenure and fixed rents”. Literacy is more than the ability to read or understand this set of facts and more than knowing about Michael Davitt. It is also the ability to extrapolate and contextualise the nature of land ownership then and now. Why are property rents so high today? What are the consequences of this? If banks and government and landlords are at the centre of power why are so many homeless today? Are 19th century evictions connected (or not) to current homelessness?

Many other questions about who we are today might be explored. Travellers, disability, inequality, democracy, a republic, Brexit, climate change could be studied. Literacy of this kind might be described as a form of “social infrastructure” that needs to be at the front of all education and given a priority in public policy, further education and training.

We could ask what does every Irish person need to know? As yet, we have no idea what knowledge or literacies are required to be an Irish citizen. What knowledge is necessary in order to have the appropriate “social infrastructure” required for a healthy, thriving, egalitarian society? Why build an economy and not a nation?

How many people could quote any part of the Easter Proclamation of 1916? We recall that it says:

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland…

The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally….

We have no idea in Ireland what literacy is required in order to lift us beyond being just an economy to become a Republic, a democracy, a society that works as hard for human rights and worker’s rights and freedom and climate action as it does for the economy. Who we are and who we will be is a task that requires, as it always did, literate and critical citizens. We will not Google our way to this.

At least the school textbooks of the 1950 had a version of Irish identity. We hardly noticed its hidden curriculum and we can be critical of that too. The current (not so) hidden curriculum is to draw a line around knowledge and literacies that are functional and useful for an economy, and in its focus on training, it ignores education. In the context of lifelong learning and a national jobs strategy it might be a really worthwhile goal to include broader social learning goals. As a result a competitive economy may be a healthy, fulfilling and equal society and it may indeed contribute to becoming “*ár dtír féin*” – our own country!

So what is required then is a new language that we can imagine; that speaks of other things and values beyond and 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, langourously, 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)

This is a recognition story. Recognition has to be taught and learned. Just like so many other things. The single most important thing we do in society is….? Children.

Yes, I am asking for ways of rearing children that are different, new ways of engaging all in their imagination and in response to their need for recognition. A way of opening a world of possibilities.

**Education and the Public Good**

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. 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). He asked Sissy ‘Girl number twenty 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.

I am making the case for a kind of learning that involves imagining and the search for new meanings. It is in sharp contrast to the functional, instrumental world of the system. I am proposing that in this 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. I spent a morning in my local Primary School (invited) and they were magic….will we save the planet?

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 social infrastructure 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.

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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1. Keynote at Donegal Education and Training Board Conference, Social Inclusion. Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, September 27, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Or earlier. Google failed me in an attempt to date the publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)