

## **Landscapes of Learning:**

### **Maps, Road Signs and other Allies on a Research Adventure<sup>1</sup>**

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Before I arrived here I imagined what this place would be like. I used maps (Google maps) and other ways of imagining this place and how to get here. [Thank you to Alessandra for the maps and wonderful directions for walking to this Villa by the lake]. My research was coloured by my prior knowledge of Lake Garda, Sirmione and Peschiera. But this is Como! My prior experiences are a strong influence on my factual knowing about this place, this landscape. In this new landscape I am easily confused and disoriented and rely on the knowledge and generosity of other individuals and on their signposts. Research is like that, something we do every day.

I also thought it might be a good idea to mention that I, and a number of others here, come from Ireland and speak English of the Irish variety where accent and syntax and vocabulary and indeed deep structure, as Chomsky calls it, is Celtic. This produces perspectives that are unique and even contradictory. I would love as a visitor to map the connections between Ireland and Italy but time is passing already. I am only going to mention in passing that the Romans visited Ireland long ago and left again without conquering it. But they left a lasting mark on the landscape and called our island Hibernia. You will immediately recognise the accuracy of that and for many centuries maps of Europe included an island the Romans called 'Winter'.

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Languages formed the landscape of Dante's writings where he played in the spaces in-between Latin and the local vernaculars. And our greatest recent Nobel prize poet Seamus Heaney borrowed from Dante, translated parts of Dante's *Inferno*, but more importantly, by accepting the traditions he found in Dante he worked in the in-between spaces of our history, and traditions and cultures. Both were in-betweeners and used this as a resource. They were both as effective as Freire at resolving dualities. Freire's concept of *praxis* reimagined the relationship between thinking and doing. Structure and agency in the poet's imagination become, 'where hope and history rhyme'. Heaney refused to be bogged-down or boxed-in by the dualities of Northern and Southern Ireland; Catholic or Protestant, Irish or English. In fact he created a space in his writings that he explicitly called 'in-between' that he relentlessly explored in his work:

Two buckets were easier carried than one.

I grew up in between.

(Heaney, 1998, p. 295)

And when he spoke of being reared in a family with an aunt and mother baking scones together in the kitchen:

here is a space

again, the scone rising

to the tick of two clocks.

(Heaney, 1998, p. 93)

I am making a number of points here.

- 1) In undertaking research, fiction, poetry, theatre all have rich resources for us to use to discover, explore;
- 2) Important concepts are often waiting to be discovered in literature. It could be about poverty or refugees or a concept like 'in-between'.

To continue for a moment with the poetry and in particular the Heaney and Dante connections it is true to say that both explored the local concerns of their own places but

through more general frameworks. Their language was embedded in ordinary experience and in the land, the landscape, the place.

In writing about the local forge (*fabbri forgiarre* who makes *ferrì di cavallo*) Heaney says 'All I have is a door into the dark' (Heaney, 1998, p. 19) and Heaney imagines in his poetry the activities inside (just as Dante did and from whom he was making an almost direct translation in that moment!). The task of researchers is to avail of the door and look inside with our sociological or educational imaginations. And like Heaney who looked inside the door (or gate) of Dante's *Inferno* and saw ways of understanding the Civil War in Northern Ireland. From that he saw and imagined and wrote about the 'tidal wave of justice'. The entire verse reads:

History says, don't hope  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.

(Heaney, 1998, p. 330)

~~*The Cure at Troy* dramatises the conflict between personal integrity and political expediency, and explores ways in which the victims of injustice can become as devoted to the contemplation of their wounds as the perpetrators are to the justification of their system. Responsive to the Greek playwright's understanding of the relations between public and private morality, *The Cure at Troy* is a sharp, fast-paced retelling of the Greek original, shot through with Heaney's own Irish speech and context.~~

In his poem *The Rain stick* which he imagines as making the sound of rain as you turn it around: He called it the 'everyday music of what happens' (Heaney, p. 395) and he turned it into pure poetry. As researchers we listen to the 'everyday music' of people's lives and filter it through our disciplines of education or anthropology or intersectionality and forge new knowledge and research findings. Research my produce a 'music you would have never known to have listened for'.

As you can see I am interested in this concept of 'in-between' and a number of years ago I began to play with it and suggest that adult educators (indeed all teachers) could define themselves as '**in-between workers**'....who work in-between the students and new learning; between the students and the school or education system; between old knowledge that is about to be transformed and new learning that needs to be held until there is no need for the in-between. This idea of 'in-between' is not a line, a border or boundary between landscapes but is a space that can do justice to the complexity of research and teaching<sup>2</sup>. Both attempt to live in this space between old understandings and new ideas, between doing things as they always were or breaking moulds and sedimented actions and policies and creating a space of dialogue.

Then recently my colleague Shirley Walters (2018) from South Africa published a paper in the *South African Journal of Education* entitled: "Working the 'in-between spaces' for transformation within the academy". She proposes this concept as a critical part of 'decolonising education through disruptive, political, pedagogical and organizational transformation' (2018, p. 1).

As a side note to our earlier discussion, Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (pp. 182-183) speaks about the nature of the world of action and speech as happening in an in-between and 'it is no less real than the objective world of things we have in common' (p. 183).

I am making these comments as part of articulating a bigger set of ideas for researchers:

1. Do not hesitate to play with ideas, concepts, words – imagine other possibilities;
2. Look to the literature not just of psychology, education, etc. but particularly to the arts, literature, film for stories, versions, words and ideas that feed the desire for justice and social change;

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<sup>2</sup> Speakers at the Spring School made very early connections with the Como landscape that a few miles away has a border with Switzerland. It's as if the border is a space beginning north of the town of Como and gradually becomes a different place. Technically by being able to tune into the mobile phone network of another provider in another country; more socially as the interactions become both in trade and in friendships a space of transition and of difference and of 'in-between'.

3. Make connections, look for connections;
4. I will attempt to do some of this making connections later, or at least talk about how to achieve this connected exploration and adventure.
5. Imagination needs to be created, nourished, exercised in research.

Most people wonder, at least in my experience, how to make these connections across any set of disciplines. Let me give one example, maybe two if we have time. Not so long ago I was the external examiner for a PhD student in a Northern Ireland university whose thesis was called something like 'Land-based enterprises in Northern Ireland: An interdisciplinary study.' He wanted to study agricultural industries from the points of view of economics, agricultural science, sociology, business studies (applied economics) and environmental sciences. It was a really interesting inter-disciplinary study. However, I thought there was one rather obvious land-based lens missing and ironically for NI it was the Judaeo-Christian religion that has been at the centre of NI politics and economics for way longer than 100 years. The entire Old Testament is a land based narrative. The God of the Jewish people promised that if they behaved as she wished and were loyal and fair in their dealings they would be given land, literally and metaphorically, flowing with milk and honey. But if they did betray Yahweh or were unjust they would lose the land. Which they did. Once by being captured and sent to Egypt and 1,000 later were again taken into exile in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar around 600 BC.

This biblical tradition is strong in the Protestant tradition and gives rise to the concept of stewardship of the land implying an ultimate conditionality about the ownership and responsibility for the environment. These ideas are well worked out in theological literature (Brueggemann, 2002) and would have added, I thought, a critical and un-ignorable perspective on farming. This thinking demands imagination, reading, discussion and other ways of gleaning ideas from colleagues and advisors. Imagination is key for the poet and the researcher.

A current PhD student is studying adult students who are admitted to college in Ireland has taken a particular liking to the ideas of the German critical theorist Axel Honneth and his work on recognition. He has discovered how students are mis-recognised in school, in society and in the art community and when they are recognised by others they are

validated. Whether we are children or adults we can benefit from giving or receiving this recognition by others. He is also discovering that these students, who form study groups are describing the importance of these supports for their integration and survival in college. He is relying on the ideas of Eithne Wenger and her concept of Communities of Practice in order to understand the success and essential importance of study-buddy groups. What he discovered was really interesting, i.e. that these CoPs were venues for, and environments for recognition. This is what I mean by making connections.

Recognition is such an important developmental energiser that we should miss no opportunity to engage in such support either as colleagues or as teachers and researchers. Recognition is personal and political just as misrecognitions are personal and political. As all ideas are basically stolen (Honneth 'stole' - or better still reworked - his from G.H. Mead and Hegel. Both Paulo Freire and Jack Mezirow freely admitted this and acknowledged how their wives, Elsa and Edee were central in the research adventures). And in this field of higher education research it is ok to beg, borrow, steal if you acknowledge this and reference. I suggest you might want to go further. For anything I did on Honneth I am indebted to Rauno Huttunen in Finland, Mark Murphy now in Scotland and Fergal Finnegan and others. So I make a point of referencing in some way this connection. It is not just the debt for the idea but an acknowledgement of the person whose work and generosity on which I rely.

### **Allies on the Research Adventure**

Who are your allies? They are unlikely to arrive uninvited or in one sudden moment of inspiration. They are like friends who may arrive and stay a while, sometimes for many years. I am really interested in what Marx said in his *Thesis on Feuerbach* including the parts that says that perception is socially constructed. Or that a world view is true if it brings about a just and working society. Social structures can be changed by critical revolutionary praxis and abstract concepts have a real existence in society in people's lives (Capital is not only an abstraction or an abstract concept in people's lives). The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

Or as Picasso said;

We have to wake people up. To revolutionize 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's not reassuring. A world that's not what they think it is.

(Malraux, 1974, p. 110)

These are important ways of justifying the undertaking of research for social justice.

Young researchers or early career researchers and scholars struggle to make sense of the the almost infinite selection of allies that are available to assist in interpreting reality. There is a challenging complexity in this. Maybe I will take up Bourdieu as my research ally! What does he say? How can I use him as a source of ideas? Who or what ideas are a close fit with my own hard-won assumptions about social change, understanding reality, etc. Who might challenge me to re-think?. Maybe I should head towards a woman as a source of sensitizing concepts for interpreting data (Nancy Fraser or Hannah Arendt). Maybe a feminist woman would provide a better perspective? There is a really interesting small book out last year by Richard J Bernstein called *Why Read Hannah Arendt now?*

My own experience of choosing allies was a mixture of luck built on a tendency to be attracted to more radical perspectives. My first graduate course in Ireland in about 1971 was on violence and non-violence in society and I wrote mainly on Angela Davis a black African-American civil rights activist. Then late in 1978 I was introduced to Mezirow, Paulo Freire and Jürgen Habermas all in the same month. Be careful who you choose, they may keep you busy for the next 40 years. It was my good fortune that all of these were relatively unknown and only a couple of books published! Read a great deal and if things are difficult use secondary sources.

What reading needs to be done now?

- 1) Keep in contact with the best of the past, and those who need to be revisited. I suspect that any of us could suggest a major author or thinker from 'the past' whose work could with profit be re-read and used in innovative ways. My own suggestion at this moment of great risk from totalitarianism is the work of Hannah Arendt;

2) Search out the very best on the topic you are interested in, e.g. immigration.

Hannah Arendt in writing about 'men in dark times' stated that;

It is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better or worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light has been extinguished by 'credibility gaps' and 'invisible government', by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations...that under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth in meaningless activity.

*Men in Dark Times*

(Bernstein, 2018)

Or again;

Thought itself arises out of the actuality of incidents of living experience must remain its guideposts by which thinking soars or into the depths to which it descends.

### **Social Justice**

As this Lake Como Spring School has a theme concerning social justice let me make some comments at this early stage of this week's proceedings. What is fair or just always depends on the context and on the situation in which the interests of others are weighed alongside social order. How society is ordered is usually the problem that cries out for justice. The existing order almost always benefits some over others, usually the few over the many. The pursuit of social justice always exists in a 'situational quagmire' as Tom Heaney calls it and always poses dilemmas. Working for social justice or with a justice agenda involves asking such questions as: whose interests am I serving here? Whose side am I on? In addition, it involves revealing (not easy) the assumptions on which one's own actions are based and the assumptions that underpin one's own values.

Social justice is always about power.



As soon as justice is mentioned and when associated with lifelong learning and/or adult education, the real situations of inequality in the world rise to the surface. New iterations of capitalism in the form of **neoliberalism**, place increasing downward pressures on the real incomes and lives of ordinary people including their ability to improve their social conditions and lifestyles. The related environmental crisis and its expression in mass migrations of peoples toward the First World and the north fleeing the South and Third World are alarming signs of what is to come.

There are difficulties aligning lifelong learning and social justice in the present situational quagmire where the State (either the nation state or the EU) insists on giving practical and policy priorities to the version of lifelong learning that aligns itself most clearly with economic development. And by supporting the neoliberal economic iterations of capitalism the possibilities of justice are diminished. This results not only in the mass migrations from South to North but a similar internal migration of values and ideas to the Extreme Right within the North. These are connected and twin migrations, one of people fleeing poverty and the other of people fleeing to a different set of values and ideas and actions (racist).

Adult education and lifelong learning has always had a tendency to value:

- Literacy,
- social justice,
- women's rights,
- democratic engagements,
- social and civil society movements,
- community based education,
- environmental groups...

Good examples of this include Antonio Fragoso's work on non-traditional HE students in Portugal is really interesting where he is inspired by Peter Alheit's concept of 'biographicity' to draw attention to the agency of non-traditional learners and their capacity to act back or push back in ways that influence their success in HE.

And I want to mention the wonderful work in Austria of Annette Sprung (who is here) and who has studied the most under studied group in adult education, refugees and using the concept of misrecognition of Honneth she writes about the damage done to vulnerable groups by these misrecognitions.

### **The economic and political context of social justice work: Neoliberalism**

There is a great coalition in the world in favour of making money, reducing taxes for the wealthy, rubbishing the public service, lowering costs cutting social supports for the poor and preventing policy makers from identifying the real causes of a number of crises. Globalization, reducing regulation, privatization are all values. Workforce flexibility is an added value. This coalition also avoids any responsibility for creating a more fair or caring society, for teaching democracy and citizenship values.

Marketing, advertising, media, new social media and communications technology all are part of this development of neo-liberalism. 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.

The history of adult education emerges from a desire to respond to the inherited disadvantages of the system, whether society in general or 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.

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.

You must read and study and continue to read and study. 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.

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?

If I were to ask you to undertake an assignment, oh no I will not really!!....what would you write as you researcher/educator creed? I could suggest as a frame within which this might be undertaken:

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. That we can measure the benefits of all learning;
8. 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);
9. Government has a responsibility to support civil society;
10. Adult education is a sound investment.
11. I will read and read and interrogate all my allies.

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.

(Leonard Cohen)

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