

The Labour Market and Further Education: An Allies?¹

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Everybody knows that the dice are loaded
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed.
Everybody knows the good guys lost.
Everybody knows that the fight was fixed
Everybody knows: the poor stay poor, the rich get rich
That's how it goes.
Everybody knows.

(Leonard Cohen, 2011, p. 178)

When I read John Sweeney's paper I was taken aback by the vista offered to an entire education sector that in the guise of offering to be an ally it offered only work skills.²

I would like to begin by thanking the Further Education and Training Forum for this invitation to speak and to Leo, Arlene and Gordon at National College of Ireland for hosting. It is wonderful to be in NCI that has a long history of engaging in labour market studies.

On general Election day I was at a most democratic moment in our most democratic space in The Round Room of the Mansion House. It was the first meeting of the National Further Education Learners' Forum, organised by AONTAS for SOLAS. And without impacting on their feedback to SOLAS I want to say that the learners remarked in great detail about the quality and calibre of their teachers. Not much about teaching. But a great deal about their teachers and their ability to care for their learning, attend to their questions, nurture their aspirations and dreams. The ability of their teachers to understand that, from the students' perspectives, 'there are no stupid questions' was a regular and welcome comment. What they were appreciating can neither be bought nor taught. Though that might need some thinking through!

Everybody knows! We live in an era of austerity. The virtue is to do more with less. However we cannot forget that austerity is actually:

1. The greatest transfer of money from poorer social classes to classes higher up.
2. Part of the neoliberal economic system in which we live.

The neoliberal economy believes that the market has priority and that the best way the state can help is to stay away – light touch regulation! But the state is required by the market to remain alert to do a number of things:

Provide education and training for this economy;

Rescue the financial institutions when they mess up real bad.

¹ Paper read at Further Education and Training Conference at National College of Ireland, March 14, 2016.

² This paper formed the reading notes for a very short moment allocated for these comments.

The problem is that the state has bought into this idea that we are an economy. The ability of government to work for a common good or a social good is limited to saying that a thriving economy allows the state to gather taxes and so redistribute. It ignores the possibility that the economy needs a thriving society. It ignores that in a democracy even the economy needs democratic accountability. At a minimum, there is a requirement that the economy and the labour market need to become an ethical space that provides fair conditions and living wages rather than zero hour contracts and other anti-labour practices.

And almost everything the state does facilitates the neoliberal agenda. *'Everybody knows: The poor stay poor, the rich get richer!'* Never before have I read a paper so firmly convinced that higher education funding must be cut back because jobs in the future labour market will need lower skill levels than those provided by the higher education system. It is certainly the first time I have heard that universities are best suited to elite and only for gifted students. On that basis alone I would never have got a degree. It is explicit in this talk that HE should be dismantled as a mass higher education system. This valorisation of the market³ in John Sweeney's paper is deeply worrying as it may indicate where the labour market (i.e. OECD, EU, IMF, etc) may want to take the higher education system as well as the Further Education system. It is this same system that has given us hospital trolleys, mass emigration, huge unemployment and cut backs in the care of disabled and in other state supported services including education. If you like what this system has done to the social supports in our society, including community projects you will love what they want to do to FE – in the guise of developing a FE sector with eyes only for the labour market. The state is in the process of turning the entire adult education provision into an exclusively labour market intervention.

In this vision there is no society, no vision of the range of learnings to which many of us believe adult have a right. This agenda infiltrates everything in society: political discourse, newspapers, ordinary conversations, education, further education and professionalization processes in FE. I am taken aback (and I here take the liberty to offer a comment) by the new name of this organisation that represents so many FE departments in so many universities and colleges that you now call this: 'The Association of Qualification Providers...'. The labour market supporters will have no need to dismantle higher education if we do this ourselves by becoming 'providers of qualifications' and forget that we offer education. A name is so important.

One of the most eloquent images of such a world of neo-liberal free market ideology is provided by *The Great Gatsby* - a 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). 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....

³ A response to the paper by John Sweeney, Raising the Status and Quality of Further Education and Training: The Labour market as an Ally, at NCI, March 14, 2016.

The economy also wants to be our friend (!) and find ways of making sure that everything we do as educators responds to the needs of the market for skilled workers. Training, skills, competencies and many more terms are the hall marks of particular kinds of learning. This is important kind of learning, and without it peoples' desire and need to work will be seriously diminished. There is also no doubt that this is only a part of what is possible and needed by a society. A society needs highly educated parents and citizens so that we can always learn more and become more skilled at doing everything that requires more learning. A thriving economy requires a fully functioning economy. A fully functioning society and thriving economy mutually require each other.

But again your students know one thing for sure: *Everybody knows!* There are no jobs out there for them – or very few. Most jobs are for levels 7 or 8 or 9 or 10 graduates. Your students clearly have no illusions about the distance they have to travel (educationally and skill-wise) to get trained to a level that will allow them get a satisfying and fulfilling job.

It is a real challenge for FE professionals to argue for and teach for and educate themselves for a vision of education that is more than the functional, the skills, and the jobs. As long as plumbing is all that is taught with its skills we will not be educators. As long as our professionalization goes no further than that we will never be educators.

This is no easy task. I suggest that it might be useful to locate the professional in what Seamus Heaney in his poetry saw as an 'in-between' space. 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' worker. 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. As anyone knows (*Everybody 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. It should also be filled with CPD, with study and reading and debate and Paulo Freire, Nussbaum, Mezirow and many others.

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. The 'in-between' is able to undertake a range of appropriate modules, teaching methods, subjects, pedagogies, justify them 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.

What is education? It is about responding to the entire spectrum of learning needs that adult have. Not only their need for work – which is a real long shot. Our state has reneged on everything besides jobs and the economy. People need to learn and we need to learn how to teach for being a member of a democracy, a republic, to care, to rear children, to care for the environment, and to assert the central importance of the social in learning and not just the importance of the economy.

The recent ESRI report (Kelly, et al., 2015) studied CE, BTEA 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 people's chance of work. As part of the grand experiment it had a control group and another group that availed of education. It called this group the 'treatment group.' *Everybody knows!* The market system that gives us grandparents on hospital trolleys, huge numbers homeless, 60,000 a year emigrating, unemployment too, disabled people and the elderly the subject of vicious cutbacks in funding will also give us training and a vision of learning devoid of any understanding of any of this social situation. *Everybody knows!* Neoliberalism requires inequality. An ethical economy would be a welcome development before promises are made to deliver zero hour contracts, boring work and minimum wages.

It is vital that we know what education is for and what it is against! It is certainly against the monopoly of the education agenda by labour market values and priorities. 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.

Literacy and reading and writing skills are not just about reading words they involve reading the economy and reading society. 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. We need to argue for and be able to include all the learning to which adults are capable of achieving.

The economy offers jobs. Training offers skills. Education offers freedom.

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.

Maya Angelou, *The Caged Bird*

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