**Further Education and Training Meets Adult Education:**

**The training of workers and the education of citizens[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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As one gets older, and I am now 14 years retired, one casts one’s memory back to earlier times. It is not that we were better then, but that there is a story to be told. My autobiography, my education and my career span about 50 years in the history of adult education. I remember in Muirheavna in Dundalk, well populated with NI refugees, the Council allocated one house as a community facility (there was a very fine Sports Centre very close). After a year of courses in the house, as AEO for Co. Louth, I proposed that the local people would choose the courses that would be sponsored by the VEC the coming year. They chose: Swimming in Drumcar (mother and toddlers), music and sewing. In 1985 I thought that the Learners Voice would be the way to go (and it was). A short number of months later, the CEO of Louth VEC was invited to the “Inaugural Performance of the Sinn Fein Band”.

It was normal for AEOs to travel the countryside with a car full of foldable, stackable chairs and a superser in the winter arriving as learners gathered in a local hall. In 1979 Adult Education Organisers were appointed to each VEC, the first dedicated staff working on adult learning needs. Their role was to organise an annual learning programme, provide information and advice to adults and prepare an annual report on their activity. Funding was sparse, but in 1984 a significant development came with the introduction of the Adult Literacy and Community Education budget, the first specifically earmarked for adult provision. This budget though small sustained adult education services through the 1980s when other support was absent. Then came VTOS in 1988(?). Thus emerged the basis of VEC adult education services (see McDonnell, 2003, p. 48).

I am telling this for two reasons:

1. That was a time, and still was the case until recently when the only citizens in Ireland who did not know where to go for education were adults. Children went to NS, teens went to Secondary Schools, and university/college and the new RTC established in the 1970s. Only recently, are there any places known as adult education centres.
2. I am also mentioning these autobiographicals because they are the foundation on which all our thinking is based. Me and you trace our thinking to what happened previously in our lives. Hannah Arendt (2018, p. 200) held that rigorous thinking should be grounded in lived experience:

…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.

**GOOGLE MAPS**

**NEWBRIDGE YOUTHREACH**

**TOMMY HURLEY**

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, 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.

This is partly a pre-curser to the very current idea that adult education starts where the learner is at and that the raw material for adult learning is the **learners own experience.**

One more autobiographical note is possible. I recently found in the attic at home some well-used primary school textbooks from Ireland in the 1950s.

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*”(our own country) (p. 5). It states

that there is no land that would get 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 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*” – our own

country. (Fleming, 2019, p. 56)

To-day, a huge amount of energy has been expended building our version of “*ár dtír féin*”. The vision of “*ár dtír féin*” is probably best described as building an economy. In this the education system in general and the adult education/FET sector has been an important participant on this journey. We have largely become involved in building this economy through education and training; through linking with FAS that has translated itself into SOLAS. And yet, in spite of the success of this economy we are still facing problems and crises in our vision and in our practice, in our experiences that make us profoundly uncomfortable and uneasy; knowing there is more.

My main comment today is to identify the flawed success of the economy and the support it has got – warts and all – from the education system. But no version of the country as an economy, is complete. Put simply we are more than an economy. But we do have in adult education a difficulty articulating, agreeing and even getting any traction from public policy on how to support the other learnings that are required to become *ar dtir fein*. I want to spend our time trying to copper fasten a vision of adult education that might respond to this “more”.

If we are not only an economy, what are we? And how does adult learning figure in this project? We are a society, a republic, a democracy and a community. However you want to describe or define these, they require learning, even lifelong learning.

Let me just name a number of the problems: Climate disaster; immigration (not unrelated to climate); wars in a number of countries; the rise of the far right; drugs; violence in families, communities and on the streets; health system with long waiting lists; homelessness; housing crisis; child abuse; poverty, literacy and so on. More subtle problems are masked by the magnitude of these major issues. The extent to which the political and economic systems are unresponsive to the real needs of citizens; the inability of the state to understand the meaning of a democracy and a republic.

**How many people do you think could quote any sentence from the Easter Proclamation of 1916 – A foundation document of the nation?**

In addition to these supply side problems there are adult rights to education that we have never established. **Adults have a right to learn everything that it is possible to know and learn.** Adults have questions, curiosities, intelligence, learning needs to do with rearing children in a world like this, that is remarkably different to that of there own parents. 10

* have no idea in Ireland what literacy is required in order to lift us above an economy to become a Republic, a democracy, a society that works as hard for human rights and worker’s rights and freedom 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!

According to current ideologies, only the economy will solve these problems by training people to work. The state in the person of the government, misunderstands the nature of democracy in a modern world. Take refugees as an example. Government departments seem to think that if they make a contract with a local hotel to house refugees and then inform the local population they have done enough. The departments believe that this is their role in a democracy. Most people are happy to have this shallow thin version of representative democracy in many matters but protest when they feel unconsulted, disengaged, have to struggle to assert their right to be informed before-hand or consulted or be brought into decision making. The resulting resentments, grievances and exclusions fuel radicalizations. Remember that if the state ever turns its mind to community education in a serious way (?) it will define community education as a top down intervention with thin democratic elements (consultation at best).

The system responds to these bottom-up issues with force or with attempts to isolate or even to find ways of massaging the grievance with better social and economic infrastructure as in Limerick city. However, I am of the view that adult education or any of the version of it – community education provides a different response. We are more than an economy and more than a people who sub-let our democratic instincts to the government.

Those who are working on Sustainable Development Goals will know that according to English and Mayo lifelong learning “has been twisted in such a way that it reduces learning to a set of narrow competences suited to a Neoliberal economy” (2021, p. 1).

**What is Neoliberalism?**

What is this system within which we live and work and which has such a powerful influence over how we think, feel, what we value and how we interpret what is meant by common sense?

Neoliberalism is…

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. (Harvey)

Neoliberalism is a political economic paradigm that refers to the policies and processes whereby a small number of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profits. (McChesney)

The neo-liberal economic doctrine proclaiming the superiority of free markets over public ownership, or even public regulation of private economic activities, has become the conventional wisdom, not only among conservatives but among the progressives. (Aronowitz)

Using certain statistics Ireland in the past 25 years developed quickly and is, even following the demise of the Celtic tiger, a model of success for many countries. The idea was widely believed that when everybody is working and the benefits are distributed by government tax policies that a fair society will be created and sustained. The idea that everybody benefitted from the Celtic Tiger and since then is a myth. Having looked forward for generations to having work, the arrival of almost full-employment disappointed. Work was not sufficient to cure all ills. Inequalities of social class continued, and housing, education, and health compared poorly in comparison with other developed countries, e.g., in EU and OECD. The accumulation of wealth by a few was a major scandal showing how work is not necessarily the source of more equality, or better housing, or better health care, or any other measure of equality. Ireland in 2000 was the second most unequal society in the EU. With 15.3% living in poverty, only the US, among Western countries was worse with 15.8% in poverty (Paul Cullen, 2002).

The state is encouraged by the economy to dismantle the welfare system and support the growth and reach of the market and its priorities. Government cutting of expenditure is part of this process of undermining the welfare state, as is the perennial promise by governments to reduces taxes. Economies are driven by an unshakable and fiercely held belief in the free market. The core belief is that the market and not politics solves all problems. The market is sovereign. Political sovereignty is reduced. Neoliberalism does not aim to increase the well-being of everybody and increases social inequality in order to drive a more competitive society and economy.

As Joel Spring (1998) observes;

OECD experts want knowledge to be measured according to its contribution to economic growth. In contrast, Confucius and Plato were interested in determining the ability of individuals to create moral and just societies. (p.168).

This is the core of the tension for society in Ireland - whether it wants to allow the economy or society to dictate national, including education and learning agendas. To frame this with different concepts we could ask: Whether the concept of nation building only involves building an economy, or is there also a project that involves building a society. An economy has a sharp focus on profits. A society, at least according to the foundational documents of the State, involves, fairness, equality and cherishing all the children of the nation equally:

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

(Easter Proclamation, 1916)

Instead, today the economy has the last word. This is hugely problematic. In every age education finds itself navigating different social and political landscapes and today in Europe the neoliberal iteration of capitalism, and its close relative austerity, provide the dominant context. Education is caught between long standing visions of learning as emancipatory and a determined drive by governments to prioritize learning and education for economic

The preoccupations with the economy and with work and with defining citizens as workers, lead to misreading the importance of education, and the ways in which students perceive the benefits of education. Considerable effort has gone into building an economy, huge resources, imagination and work have been brought to bear on this issue, and rightly so. But one is entitled to wonder what may have been the outcome if similar energy and resources and imagination had been expended on nation building, including support for learning for citizenship and community engagements (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023). We are not only an economy, but also a society and a nation.

**Make a case for Irish Literature**

In his *Memoirs* (2005) John McGahern tells of having survived a childhood of love and hatred in rural Ireland. He begins by talking about the “inch deep” soil of Leitrim where one can trace “the beaten path the otter takes between the lakes” and the “quiet places on the edge of the lakes…where the otter feeds and trains her young” (2005, p. 1). On the final page he returns to the otter, but also talks about his mother who died when he was eight:

She never really left us. In the worst years, I believe we would have been broken but for the different life we had known with her and the love she gave that was there like hidden strength.

When I reflect on those rare moments when I stumble without warning into that extraordinary sense of security, that deep peace, I know that consciously and unconsciously she has been with me all my life.

If we could walk together through those summer lanes, with their banks of wild flowers that ‘cast a spell’, we probably would not be able to speak, though I would want to tell her all the local news.

We would leave the lanes and I would take her by the beaten path the otter takes under the thick hedges between the lakes. At the lakes’ edge I would show her the green lawns speckled with fish bones and blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young.…

As we retraced our steps, I would pick for her the wild orchid and the windflower.

(McGahern, 2005, p. 271-272)

McGahern knew that his mother forged for him a secure childhood and he carried this security with him all his life. This paper will explore the nature of this security and the implications for adult learning.

RISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN:  
In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment and supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades in arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. 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 the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien Government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline, and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on behalf of the Provisional Government:

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| THOMAS J. CLARKE, SEAN Mac DIARMADA  P. H. PEARSE, JAMES CONNOLLY, EAMONN CEANNT JOSEPH PLUNKETT | THOMAS MacDONAGH |



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