

Beyond the Third Way:
New Challenges for
Critical Adult and
Community Education

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Introduction

In the mid-nineties, when I was trying to make convincing connections between community development and adult education, the neo-liberal tendencies in the sector profoundly disturbed me. All over Ireland, local and community development groups were springing up, developing strategic plans for their areas. While some of these plans were genuinely consultative and indisputably concerned with poverty and inequality, many were purely economic, demonstrating little concern for social issues. The elements of the neo-liberal tendencies included the alliance with *The Third Way*, the neo-liberal ideology of economics, which entails going beyond Left and Right, and promoting the 'what works' strategy. Giddens has been highly influential in devising this ideological strategy, laying the foundation for the emergence of New Labour type politics that has prevailed in Ireland, the UK and the USA under Clinton (Giddens, 1994). However, this centrist positioning overtly supported corporate power, at the expense of the poor, and pushed the privatisation of all kinds of services, such as the health service, to the detriment of the public service. A key example in Ireland was the privatisation of the telecommunications services. The short-term effect was to substitute communal ownership with corporate ownership and shareholders, but in the long term, outcomes to the service users are disastrous. No broadband nationally, high prices for terrestrial communications and the highest costs in Europe for mobile phone users.

However, with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see that these economic plans did indeed help to revitalise an Ireland that was overwhelmingly damaged by unemployment and emigration. In these days of full employment, it is difficult to believe that, in the mid-eighties, a quarter of a million people were officially unemployed; two hundred thousand people had emigrated; and many women were not eligible to sign on the live register of unemployment. But it is important to remember that, simultaneously, women's community education had entered a new era. Funding mechanisms from Europe, such as New Opportunities for Women (NOW), or philanthropic foundations such as Allen Lane, which seamlessly connected with the existing community education programmes, supported this sector fundamentally. National organisations, such as AONTAS were quick to recognise this trend and highlighted it in various ways. The Department of Adult and

Community Education in Maynooth had already played a substantial role in the development, offering a programme of critical courses and politicised tutors (Ryan & Connolly, 2000). Tellingly, these politicised tutors carried critical discourses into community education, especially through the processes and methods of critical pedagogy, and influenced it profoundly. This article will explore this phenomenon, looking at the sources of politicisation, and connect it with the communitarianism of development in Ireland over the past ten years or so.

Communitarianism is often seen as the social arm of neo-liberal economics. However, communitarianism has very different emphases, focusing as it does, on the communal over the individual, and the issues of poverty and inequality over consumerism and market forces. This focus on a just and fair society is contingent on the philosophical and ethical commitment to civil, social and cultural rights for the population. This is all the more stark when we consider that the strong emergence of neo-liberal economics over the past ten years in Ireland is often accompanied by regret for the breakdown of community. We have smirked to ourselves when Fianna Fáil invited Robert Putnam over to speak at its think tank on building communities. But the government has failed to recognise the interconnectedness of ideology: it is not possible to promote, privilege and show absolute partiality towards the individualism of neo-liberalism economic capital on the one hand, and to simultaneously promote the collectivity and mutual interdependence of social capital on the other.

In many ways, the partnerships of the past ten years have fallen into this trap. Partnerships were established as a way of formalising the existing community development processes, and linking them with other social actors, such as employers, politicians, social services providers, and so on. The aim was to capture the energy of the movement, and direct this energy into regeneration and community building. They are aiming towards a sustainable community enterprise model of development. However, in many ways, partnerships were established without building the safeguards of the just society. Further, the government has entrusted the partnerships with the task of solving enormous social problems. For example, widespread drug misuse is out of control now, with devastating consequences for families, communities and neighbourhoods and leading to organised crime on a scale never before witnessed in Ireland. But this is a societal problem, and community development is not equipped or resourced to tackle it in the long term. Social capital is the key to maintaining democracy and building participation in civil society (Putman, 2002), but active citizenship in Ireland is now reduced to Tidy Towns committees and participation in Neighbourhood Watch. These, of course, are important for social cohesion, but they do not succeed in addressing the real problems in society, such as poverty,

educational disadvantage, environmental degradation and social exclusion. Rather, this model of participation and active citizenship has the effect of diverting attention away from these problems and absorbing huge community energies.

This article will look at neo-liberalism, and examine how it co-opts popular movements, such as community development. I will explore critical adult and community education and the part it could play in building a communitarian model of community development, enabling people to develop a critical analysis of neo-liberal development. In particular, it will look at critical pedagogy as the most essential component of praxis, the key route to transformation and consciousness raising.

Critical Pedagogy

For me, adult and community education centres on the work of Paulo Freire, especially *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). His ideas have been very influential along two strands, that is, via Henry Giroux's critical pedagogy in mainstream schooling (2006), and bell hooks' feminist pedagogy (1994). Giroux must be read in the company of Peter McLaren (1989). These US voices have few counterparts in Ireland. In Ireland, mainstream pedagogy is based on what Freire calls 'the banking system'. That is, it is based on a relationship which involves:

a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). ... The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable. His (sic) task is to 'fill' the students with the contents of his narration... (Freire, 1972, p. 45)

Notwithstanding his use of the male pronoun, Freire's analysis of the teacher/student relationship encapsulates the model that is most familiar, whether it refers to the sociology lecturer in the theatre at university or the mathematics teacher at the chalk board in secondary school. This relationship is essentially hierarchical, authoritarian, and undemocratic, but this ideology of pedagogy is suppressed in the familiar and unquestioned disconnection between theory and practice. Definitions of pedagogy locates it as a science of methods, which avoids an ideological analysis, common in science orientated epistemology. This means that pedagogy is regarded as neutral, non-controversial and unproblematic. Adult and community education argues against this, proposing an alternative social analysis of pedagogy and education.

This alternative social analysis on the role of education is illuminated in Kathleen Lynch's *The Hidden Curriculum* (1989) where she argues the key role that education plays in the reproduction of the status quo, in the Irish context. Lynch asserts that a sociological analysis of the Irish education system shows that it did not contribute to a significant redistribution of resources (1989). She continues this work in *Equality in Education* (1999) where she affirms that part of the problem in tackling the issue of inequality is the inability of sociology to look at equality outside of the liberal framework, and selective mobility,

inherent in equal opportunities, has reinforced structural inequalities. She promotes the notion of critical theory as a way forwards, and she maintains that 'critical educational theory is a very real attempt to present a model of explanation which incorporates a theory of praxis-orientated action' (1999, p. 79).

However, she argues that critical education theory has not liaised with normative moral and political theory. This means that there is no vision for an alternative future, no proposal as to how a just and equal society might look. However, a feminist perspective may suggest what is possible, as we look at the profound changes emanating from the women's movement on both personal and social planes; and a feminist critical education analysis may be the key to offering alternative concrete policy and political implications. While the focus of my interest is on critical pedagogy in adult and community education, I want to review the overarching lifelong learning context.

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning has acquired a new profile in the European community. The development of policy in lifelong learning demonstrates a new role for lifelong learning in the knowledge society and the information economy. The spotlight on lifelong learning has illuminated the part that adult and community education has played in developing human and social capital, and how flexibility and openness have contributed to making learning attractive (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, p. 5). In addition, the European community is contextualised within other agencies concerned with democracy, social inclusion and economic development, particularly the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD has been highly influential in sponsoring lifelong learning as a key conduit to the knowledge society and the information economy. It holds that lifelong learning is a key element in fostering democratic participation and citizenship, as well as social and economic well-being (OECD, 1996). The definitions of lifelong learning are varied, but the OECD definition is useful:

[Lifelong learning includes] all purposeful learning, from the cradle to the grave, that aims to improve knowledge, and competencies, for all individuals who wish to participate in learning activities. (OECD, 2004, p. 1)

The distinguishing features of the vision for lifelong learning include: a systemic, cross sector, view; a view that accords centrality to the learner and motivation to learn; and finally, recognition of the multiplicity of educational goals, including personal development, knowledge development, economic, social and cultural objectives. These goals overlap with my vision of adult and community education, though not completely. I feel that it is

useful to connect my area of interest, to the wider thinking in lifelong learning, as Skilbeck emphasises the importance of the way in which lifelong learning is carried out. He says that it should be 'inclusive, attractive, accessible, well-articulated, of high quality and relevance – and appropriate in...functioning, content and style to all learners (2001, p. 56).

That is, if the lifelong learning agenda is expanded into third level education, it would necessarily entail a shift from traditional pedagogy, to this more fluid, inclusive and learner-centred model. This is still a long way from critical pedagogy, but it is very interesting to see the shift away from traditional models towards the adult and community education model. This necessarily entails the repositioning of academics, so as 'to achieve a more open style of operation and closer integration with the community' (2001, p. 14). Simultaneously, the European Commission focused on basic skills, targeting the most educationally disadvantaged among the populations.

The European Commission set in motion the subsequent development of lifelong learning with *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (2000) making the case for the promotion of lifelong learning with emphasis on six areas, again echoing the interests of adult and community education:

- Basic skills, focusing not just on adult basic education, but also on multi-lingual, ICT, and other key competences;
- Investment in human development, especially in relation to human resources;
- Innovation in teaching and learning, with particular focus on adult education methodologies;
- Valuing learning for its own sake;
- Rethinking guidance and bringing it into the realm of what adults might need for balanced living, rather than the existing concentration on adolescents' vocational needs;
- And finally, bringing learning out of the institutions and into the community, closer to home and the workplace. (Commission of European Communities, 2000, p. 2)

These priorities elicited a number of responses, which praised the memorandum on its breadth of vision, but cautioned against the overwhelming pull of the market. For example, the report from Ireland, following a round of consultations, re-iterated the role of philosophy and guiding principles that ought to underpin the practice of lifelong learning as promoted in the memorandum. It also emphasised the need to give weight to active citizenship, as the ultimate desirable outcome of lifelong learning, and employment skills as secondary outcomes. In addition, it recognised that there was a lack of attention to the issue of equality. The Irish submission (COM, 2001) shows the ideological position of lifelong learning in Ireland, putting it firmly on the side of the poor and disadvantaged, and the Commission in the *Communication*, shows that this point was taken seriously:

There were, however, concerns that the employment and labour market dimensions of lifelong learning were too dominant within the definition. Indeed, in relation to specifying the objectives of lifelong learning, responses tended to echo the Memorandum as well as citing wider aspects such as the spiritual and cultural dimensions of learning. Overall, consensus can be surmised around the following four broad and mutually supporting objectives: personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability. (Commission of European Communities, 2001, pp. 16-19)

These political and philosophical dimensions are essential if lifelong learning is to be reflexive, as it becomes more institutionalised: dimensions that it looks for in learners. Thus, the promotion of lifelong learning could, if supported, bring reflexivity about, as a norm. This would mean that the wherewithal to constantly review itself is built in. This quality is essential, as lifelong learning is embedded in policy development in Europe, with the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process. The Lisbon Strategy, formulated in 2000, holds that economic growth, social inclusion and sustainable development are contingent on the knowledge society, and has devised an agenda for lifelong learning to promote learning. This strategy has underpinned the developments in individual EU countries, and has been very influential in setting the agendas on national development plans. Further, it has connected civil society with the economy inextricably, a result that is positive in bringing the economy out into the public domain, where it can be scrutinised and regulated more closely. That is, the economy has been perceived as being governed by irrefutable internal laws, such as the law of supply and demand. In civil society these laws can be interrogated, especially in relation to initiatives such as fair trade, or minimum wages. Thus, the Lisbon Strategy, by promoting learning as participation in civil society, has, intentionally and unintentionally, incorporated a built-in process of evaluation and review.

The Bologna Process, again underpinned by the lifelong learning agenda within the knowledge society, focuses on the Universities, and their role in constructing the knowledge society. A key outcome of the Bologna Process is the Qualifications Framework, which aims to provide an internationally recognised framework of educational credentials. The effects of this framework is to have transparency across the continent, a key solution to the elitism of the traditional qualifications pathways, highly dependent on traditional learners, and very resistant to the needs of non-traditional learners.

This means that lifelong learning takes a foothold in the formal system. Alongside this, it has provided a recognisable umbrella for adult and community education, together with an implicit acknowledgement of the value and worth of the processes and methods that

makes adult and community education so effective. In addition, adult and community education has long promoted access and support for non-traditional learners in third level education, but it has taken the lifelong learning agenda to guarantee this. Thus, while the policy development in lifelong learning has been driven by the emergence of the knowledge economy, the policy proliferation has created a fertile ground on which adult and community education can grow and flourish. But the policy proliferation must be welcomed with caution, to ensure that adult and community education is not press-ganged into another agenda. The next section will take a closer look at the Irish context, to examine it in the light of the principles and philosophies which provide the milieu for adult and community education. These European policy developments frame this context, yet there is a clear distinction between the Irish and the European cases.

The Irish Context

Following on from European policy development, this section will explore policy papers as a prelude to more academic literature. It is heartening to see that the White Paper on Education (Department of Education, 1995) maintains the commitment to redistribution through education. It re-asserts this function, with particular emphasis on minority and disadvantaged groups, and how education ought to be concerned with justice and equality for them. However, the culture of inequality is more pervasive than the political will to implement the policies set down in the White Paper, and there is very little evidence that the goal of equality is on the real agenda:

In contemporary Ireland, the signs, sounds and symbols of conspicuous consumption, market forces and materialistic secularism abound; they have been described recently as 'turbo-capitalism'. (Sugrue, 2004, p. 1)

This is the context for these educational reviews that have taken place over the past ten years or so. While some attention has been paid to social justice, particularly as a socialist Minister for Education, Niamh Breathnach, was responsible for shaping the White Paper, in 1995, the system has proved remarkably resistant to social transformation. Sugrue continues: 'despite the depth of dialogue... more deeply embedded educational structures have remained remarkably resistant to change (2004, p. 6).

Instead, Lynch maintains that those concerned with inequality are removed from government policy implementation, and further, that they are not able to propose alternatives to mainstream education that would bring about more equal outcomes (1999, p. 24). In addition, her powerful work, from ten years previously, which highlighted the issues addressed in the White Paper, shows that the embedded inequalities perpetuate themselves in the hidden curriculum, the main conduit being the ways in which education is conducted (1989).

The main conduit for policy implementation in Ireland, over the past ten years, has been a social process called partnership. The partnership process developed within the community sector, particularly with the emergence of the communitarianism. Communitarianism has attempted to chart a course between Left and Right wing politics. The concept of communitarianism has been developed over the past 20 years or so (Bell, 1993). The model of responsibility to and for one another is central to the concept, and it proposes a code of ethics based on this responsibility, rather than, for example, religious morality. It encompasses the rights based codes of liberal humanism, but goes beyond them, in attempting to build active citizenship, social obligation, and self-reliance. In Ireland, we have seen community responses to many of the issues in society, that have emerged as the outcome of the state's inability to address or to cope with difficulties inherent in modern society (Ó Cinnéide & Walsh, 1990). It is an alternative to the harshness of individualism, and it fosters self-expression and self-determination.

Community development, as the grassroots activity that has applied communitarian ideology, has been a very powerful agent in raising issues around social and cultural inequality, such as poverty, discrimination, neglect, and other disadvantages. Community development essentially entails members of a community – geographical or issue-based – identifying their needs in terms of development, sustainability and education, and collectively working together to meet those needs. The processes integral to community development provided a blueprint for partnership. The Irish Government co-opted these processes in the national development plans for social and economic progress. These national plans filtered into all corners of Irish public life. The Irish Government views it as a consultative and negotiation process which takes over from the traditional adversarial processes. Social partnership is concerned with economic and social progress, and it centres on four pillars: the Trade Unions, Employer and Business, Farming, and Community and Voluntary, with which the Government negotiates. These pillars seem to be socially inclusive, and a lot of attention is paid to 'soft skills' such as team building and trust. It includes group development, familiar to all of us in adult and community education, with an emphasis on inclusion and influence in decision making. However, a brief review indicates that the Government has plans to expand and develop the partnership approach:

The use of the full range of available [through partnership, of] joint problem solving, decision-making and group development processes varies significantly between committees, with some being very advanced and innovative and others considerably less so. Generally, these new processes are quite under-developed and under-used.

(<http://www.bettergov.ie/index.asp?docID=184> accessed 25th November 06)

The success of the Irish economy has obscured the ideology which underpins the partnership approach. The preoccupation with the economy has over-ridden all other considerations, and the partnership approach puts the stamp of approval on it. This is in spite of the silenced voices, particularly women's groups, minority groups, and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, in Ireland, we are closer to the USA economic model, than the European one of welfare and social care, and this emerges through the normative discourses, unbidden, in the consultation process within partnership. Further, there is a strong anti-intellectual strain in partnership, which Sugrue and Gleeson attribute to the pragmatism adopted by Irish society since the foundation of the state in 1922 (2004, pp. 277-279). Further, they continue with the connections between ideology and the lack of progress in promoting equality and justice in the education system. They identify elements of the hidden curriculum in a number of dimensions.

It is necessary therefore, particularly in relation to curriculum reform to delve even deeper into the substance and process of reform to identify continuities as well as changes wrought through partnership to explore the very notion of partnership and the extent to which it has promoted more inclusive participation and more democratic decision-making.

(2004, pp. 6-7)

Another dimension Sugrue and Gleeson examine is that of the conflation of the knowledge society and the knowledge economy. They provide a useful thumbnail distinction, courtesy of Hargreaves (2003): 'The knowledge economy serves the private good. The knowledge society also encompasses the public good' (p. xvi). However, any attempt to address the public good through the curriculum have been robustly resisted, (Sugrue & Gleeson, 2004, pp. 284-286), in favour of the standardised measurement system culminating in the Leaving Certificate. This resistance is located within a number of contexts through the absence of debate, or, as Sugrue and Gleeson name it, silences and virtual silences. They include teacher training and teachers unions, parents associations, the discourse of anti-intellectualism and the dominance of the centre right ideology in policy implementation (2004, pp. 293-301). Traditionally, teacher education was controlled by the Roman Catholic Church, with the main intention to perpetuate Irish catholicism, against the trend of secularisation. In addition, the feminisation of the profession has led to the reduction of status. The feminisation has not been accompanied by feminist changes; rather it has led to regression to traditional gender roles, and the perception that schooling is an extension of the domestic domain, rather than a public community activity, the most significant connection for children and adolescents with civil society. Lynch and Lodge also worry about the increasing alienation from learning by the students coming from second level. This applies even those who 'do well', i.e. those who get the high marks, and manage to register for the University courses of their choice. This alienation is evident almost immediately on leaving school, coming from a system which promotes conformity, standardisation, and control over creativity, innovation and critical thinking (2002).

Finally, Sugrue and Gleeson identify the lack of research around education as crucial in maintaining silence. This point demonstrates the status of education in the overall social agenda. There is very little funding for research, and whatever resources are available are put into investigating what works, rather than any critique or questionings of assumptions or approaches, focusing on good news. They found that there is little or no commitment to informing debate and policy decision-making. In addition, they maintain that classrooms and schools continue to be 'secret gardens', with the consequence that no reform is possible when teaching stays within the four walls (2004, pp. 301-303). The desire to open up the practice of teaching through research has led to the narrow classroom focus: how to improve practice and how to improve the teacher/student relationship. While this is an improvement, taking the practice out of the private domain and into the public, it has the effect of taking the focus off the role of education in society. This necessarily entails a form of double bind. It colludes with the discourse of standardisation and measurement, and supports the co-option of education for the knowledge economy.

The struggle to reclaim education for the public good is taking place between a small number of critical educators against the large number of common sense politicians and powerful partners in the mainstream arenas. Adult and community education, on the other hand, is a marginal arena, and it has an array of fora for discussion of the very topics that are silenced in the mainstream. This is due, in part, to the politicisation of the key players: the participants. An emancipatory ideology, rather than the more reforming ideology of *The White Paper on Education* (DE, 1995), underpinned the *White Paper on Adult Education*, (DES, 2000). This was both following the current trends in the field, as well as shaping the future. For example, the consultation rounds before the White Paper on adult and community education, included a large number of groups and networks committed to the social justice model of adult and community education. AONTAS, The National Association for Adult Education; NALA, The National Association for Adult Literacy; The Shanty Educational Project, committed to social transformation; several women's community education networks as well as a huge number of participants contributed to this consultation round (DES, 2000). There are no such organisations within mainstream education, and participants – students – are particularly silenced, deferring to parents' associations, which are more committed to the *status quo*. In addition, the teachers' unions are more committed to employment conditions, which has of course served the sector well, but it is more resistant to critiquing the profession *per se*, and they are frequently at odds with an emancipatory processes prevalent in adult and community education. Adult and community education is explicit in its commitment to educationally and socially marginalised groups, and this shapes the field. Freire's theory and practice is concerned with these groups. In contrast to mainstream education, critical

adult education approaches are vitally important, and the voices of critical educators are heard in all the learning sites: in the national organisations; in the training of adult educators; among the participants; and among the organisers and facilitators.

This critical voice is recognised in the larger sociological community, in addition to the educational community. For example, Tovey and Share acknowledge the growth in adult and community education as rapid and significant (2003, pp. 197-199). Lynch perceives it as pivotal in community development, (1997, p. 118) and it is seen as a positive alternative to the inflexible, conservative mainstream schooling system (Hannan *et al*, 1998, p. 127). Indeed, adult and community education has more in common with new social movements than with societal institutions. Groups such as workers groups, unemployment groups, community development groups, the Irish Traveller Movement, the women's movement, and gay rights movement are underpinned by liberation ideology. Adult and community education has been significant within these groups, as well. This sector is part of the communitarian trend. Identified in the US, by Etzioni (1993, cited in Powell and Geoghegan, 2004, p. 1), it has a different history in Ireland, beyond the scope of this article. However, from the late 1980s, many Freire-inspired groups in disadvantaged communities promoted it. It was supported by the state, particularly by the Combat Agency, and was advocated as the middle ground between right and left. The key to communitarianism is that power is distributed into communities, be they geographical or interest led. The members of the community identify their needs and work collectively to meet those needs (Kelleher and Whelan, 1992). Adult and community education is central to this process, and in this environment, the critical dimensions of the field are embedded in the practice. The next section will look at the sources for politicised community activities, and locate the field of adult and community education within this milieu. In this, critical theory and new social movements provides the most fertile ground for the development of the seeds for the community strand of the sector, while the women's movement is the source for the radical learning dimensions.

Sources for the Politicised Dimensions of Adult and Community Education

New Social Movements

Freire's thinking (1972) has embedded critical pedagogy in adult and community education, while mainstream education has resisted any attempts to transform the pedagogical approaches which interfere with the private transactions within the classroom. Critical pedagogy in adult and community education has the explicit and particular intention of enabling disadvantaged people to claim their civil status in an envisioned just and equal society. In contrast with the old social movements' theory, taking the labour movement as an example, new social movements are more likely to be gender, age or race/ethnicity based, and are more likely to have to have their political sites in civil society,

rather than state and mainstream politics. They are more likely to be ethically based, rather than interest based, and are by and large non-hierarchical, relying on networking and informal organisation, instead. Further, they are less concerned with sectional interests and more interested in values, ideals and an envisioned fairer and just society (Tovey & Share, 2003, pp. 449-451). Tovey and Share contextualise Habermas' contribution, in their analysis of the late modern Ireland, in terms of the youth, peace and ecology movements (Habermas, 1987, cited in Tovey and Share, 2003, p. 452), which are congruent with adult and community education. The concept of 'lifeworld' is very useful here. Lifeworld includes the everyday interpersonal relationships, within and outside of the family, where we are orientated towards mutual understanding and common ground. This concept is very useful in helping to explain the trends in new ways of living, in relationships and in developing the self. The emergence of new social movements can be seen as a response by the lifeworld to the threat of colonisation by the forces of the economy, by the objectification of the population, and other forms of domination and coercion, (Tovey & Share, 2003, p. 452). However, a number of new social movements have an alternative ideology, with an avowedly explicit agenda of rolling back the advances emanating from the liberatory social movements. For example in Ireland, a great proportion of the Pro-Life movement are people under the age of twenty-five, and the most public face of it is Youth Defence:

Youth Defence modelled itself on the tactics of Operation Rescue type groups in the U.S. On marches they chanted "we don't need no birth control, hey Taoiseach leave the kids alone". They leafleted on Saturdays in the city centres with gruesome pictures of supposed abortions. They picketed TD's houses, including those of Nuala Fennell and Eamonn Gilmore. They rang in death threats to Radio Dublin when it wouldn't carry interviews with them. Pro-choice campaigners, in one incident, were attacked with pick-axe handles and snooker cues resulting in broken bones. Youth Defence marches were 'stewarded' by hired heavies (complete with wrapped knuckles).

(<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/ws93/abortion38.html> accessed 25th November 06)

These reactionary social movements have an ethical underpinning, but do not have a liberatory ethos, and they grow in the same milieu as adult and community education. However, their conservative ethos counters the possibilities for social transformation. The development of the reactionary ethos is of deep concern for those of us passionate about critical education, and the part that it could, if nourished, play in supporting change.

The reliance on neo-conservative right-wing thinking for the modus operandi of organisations like Youth Defence demonstrates the type of jungle in which the human freedom movements find themselves. I find it is most illuminating to look at the Critical Pedagogy website, to see the connections between social movements, civil society, and education:

The primary characteristic of this school of thought (critical theory) is that social theory, whether reflected in educational research, art, philosophy, literature or business, should play a significant role in changing the world, not just recording information.

(<http://www.perfectfit.org/CT/ct1/html>, accessed 25th November 06)

The links between critical theory and the practice of new liberatory social movements are difficult to trace. There is little doubt that new social movements have the capacity to mobilise populations of people with raised consciousness, ethical positions and reflexivity. Ultimately, despite operating outside of the traditional political pathways, new social movements achieve political objectives, and indeed, as Tovey and Share maintain, they have managed to redefine politics itself (2003, p. 456). An example from the ecology movement which has persuaded the state to become involved in recycling and reducing waste. In Ireland plastic bags are levied, against the pressure from industry, but to great popular success.

Writers from the European tradition now recognise that social structural or ideological characteristics of societies are not sufficient to explain the emergence and development of specific NSMs [new social movements].

(Tovey & Share, 2003, p. 456)

When we look at adult and community education through the lens of new social movements, I think it helps to position it more clearly in society. That is, the actuality of adult and community education is outside of the traditional models of social institutions. The emphasis on dialogue and common understandings; underpinned by ethical considerations such as respect for difference and diversity; driven by the key players; and devoted to growth and development, and fulfilling the potential of all the participants, are the major characteristics of adult and community education. We can see it both as an example of new social movements in its own right, and also as the key route to enabling people to gain the understandings of the same social movements. In this dual role, it has gathered a momentum as a force for social change, and in doing so, it is fulfilling its stated and implicit objectives, that of social transformation. It has also a key role in personal change. In order to look at this more closely, I will now consider the influence of critical pedagogical thinkers before moving on to feminist scholars, and the women's movement, by reviewing the position of critical research and epistemology in the adult and community education arena.

Critical Pedagogy

While education for democracy has been part of the agenda for many years, increasingly, mainstream education has become commodified, as a product to be consumed, rather than a process to be undertaken. As such, the status it holds in Irish society is that of training for professional occupation, the main route to privilege and resources for most people. In the area of adult and community education, though, there is strong resistance to the push for credentialisation, at the expense of emancipation. Freire (1972) has been the key influence in the field of adult and community education, in Ireland. Since the foundation of this field in the community, through the literacy movement, and in higher education, with the establishment of post-graduate education for educators programmes, Freire's liberation theology and Marxism has been the guiding vision (see for example, Connolly, 2003). Freire's concepts of conscientization and praxis have underpinned the pedagogy in adult and community education, gradually gaining recognition for the effectiveness in liberatory education. However, the position of critical pedagogy in mainstream Irish education is very marginal, and critical educators have not had the same impact as journalists and commentators such as Fintan O'Toole. However, educators such as Henri Giroux have arguably developed a profile among critical thinkers in the US.

The critical question here is whose future, story and interests does the school represent... Critical pedagogy argues that school practices need to be informed by a public philosophy that addresses how to construct ideological and institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority of students becomes the defining feature of schooling.

(<http://www.perfectfit.org/CT/giroux1.html> accessed 25th November 06)

He asserts that critical pedagogy attempts to create new knowledge through the emphasis on interdisciplinary thinking, taking into account the lived experience of people. It is fundamentally an ethical positioning, which locates itself around the categories of race, gender, class and ethnicity in these experiences (2005). This follows from Freire's conscientization, spelling out with more clarity – and including the issue of gender which Freire completely ignored – the elements involved in reflection on one's own experiences. This also parallels the most basic process in the women's movement, that of consciousness raising, and the generating of new ways of knowing. Giroux recognises that Freire was crucial in shaping theoretical stances in areas such as post-colonial studies, critical adult and community education, and the primacy of politics in education. Further, Freire was not simply proposing a method; rather he placed the onus on the educator to generate knowledge. However, his lack of awareness of gender was a major flaw (hooks, 1994). He

exhorted educators to be broader intellectuals, not technicians. Most crucially, he revitalised the relationship between theory, practice and the struggle for social justice (Giroux, 2005). This point is crucial, in terms of the role of the educator.

Increasingly, the educator is the purveyor of methods devised to carry out a curriculum, which is formulated in terms of what society needs. This generally refers to the economy, and I will look at it in the Irish context. However, the point here is that educators are devalued in their intellectual role, and re-valued as report writers and assessors of learning. Apple views this technical role as part of the overall decline of education as liberation, and the promotion of education as 'something one purchases – the school itself is turned into a lucrative market' (1986, p. 163). Further, the market/consumer dynamic pushes the individualistic trend to the logical end-point, that of the disconnection with the social and cultural context. It is most difficult to generate class/race/gender consciousness with the meritocratic system, and yet, the meritocratic system is perceived as the fairest way in which to distribute educational advantage. McLaren perceives that it is the role of the critical pedagogue to forge this link, to work as an educator to bring in the social and cultural into the individual learning experience (1989, p. 230). Thus, the role of critical pedagogy is to develop the educator as theorising intellectuals, and to develop in the students, a critical consciousness in the process of education. This links it with critical epistemology, underpinned by critical research. In the next section, the part of feminist scholarship is examined.

Feminist Scholarship

The concept of the lifeworld is very useful in focusing on the main dimensions of adult and community education. Concerned as it is with the minutiae of everyday, (extra)ordinary living, the face-to-face realities of interpersonal relationships, it provides the wherewithal to study this sphere of human life. When 'turbo-capitalism' operates in this world, it objectifies people and reduces them to consumers, helpless in the maelstrom of market forces. Yet it is this very site that adult and community education is most concerned. The feminist slogan, 'the personal is political' could be the mantra for this sphere. Adult and community education reclaims the personal from the consumer/client/customer domains, for the domain of active citizenship and agency. 'All personal change is a form of learning or questioning' (Williamson, 1998, p. 172).

Adult and community education is much more than the continuous development of skills; it embraces self-knowledge, covering both thoughts and feelings about who we are, free from social prescriptions like class and race. The forms of self-understanding open to us are both private and public, part of the wider cultural discourses on identity and experiences. The differences in roles and identities reflect much more than the functional importance attached to them, and the exercise of power by the power elite is ultimately decisive in attributing status and value to those roles (Williamson, 1998, pp. 173-174).

When women's community education started in the early 1980s, the ways of working, the content of the programmes and the learning environments were radically different to anything that had gone on in Ireland before. It seemed to be a very feminine set up, with loose, informal networks allowing the entire phenomenon to develop. The lived experience of the participants was the fundamental starting point. Most women did not identify with the women's liberation movement, which they perceived as removed from their lives. This (mis)interpretation was fed by media ridicule of the movement, while, in reality, women were beginning to enjoy the benefits of the changes, such as contraception, work outside the home, and the notion of childcare (Connolly, 2003). However, the net impact of the women-led project is the proliferation of the feminist dimensions, which subverted the traditional, hierarchical, and conventional models of adult education. That is, feminist methodologies emerged, underpinned by distinct feminist epistemologies. Stanley and Wise were pioneering feminist sociology in Higher Education, from the 1980s onward, yet it was more evident in the marginal world of adult and community education. Stanley and Wise advocated feminist research in order to create the common ground for academic acceptance and social power, and contributed hugely to the development of feminist ways of knowing (1993). Their insights and arguments are particularly pertinent in looking at critical adult and community education, with the stance that feminist theory should be at some level consonant with experience, that the researcher (educator) is on the same critical plane as the participants, and that 'reality' is constructed by the subject (p. 200). This is congruent with Luke and Gore, who say:

As feminist educators, we all attempt...to create pedagogical situations which 'empower' students, demystify canonical knowledges, and clarify how relations of domination subordinate subjects marked by gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and many other markers of difference.

(1992, p. 1)

Feminist research inherently captures the dramatic decline in the absolutes of positivism and rationalism. Lather welcomes the notion of research as praxis, the direct linking between theory, practice, and reflexivity (1991, p. 50-51). This again is congruent with the possibilities in adult and community education, and has the potential to disrupt the old orders. Luke and Gore add a perspective on male critical educators, which brings us back to Giroux and McLaren.

But in the process of trying to create emancipatory classrooms, we have come up against 'uneasy' readings:...our readings of where feminist educational work stands in relations to male-authored critical pedagogy.

(Luke and Gore, 1992, p. 1)

Their uneasiness lies in finding themselves as feminist educators within patriarchal systems of knowledge, scholarship and pedagogical relations. This resonates with Stanley and Wise, and with my own experience as a feminist educator. In spite of the rhetoric and the profile of educators such as Giroux, critical pedagogy has not made an impact in education in any real way (Kanpol, 1999, pp. 1& 185). Critical pedagogy is still embedded in patriarchal relations, silencing the feminist voices, or at least marginalising them. In addition, critical pedagogy is enmeshed in systems that have been staunchly resistant to human freedom and liberatory change, such as global capitalism; or they have incubated grass roots movements, using the learning from civil rights movements, etc. dedicated to rolling back the advances made over the past forty years or so. Feminist critical educators could demonstrate a new way of working, working alongside allies in the field of adult and community education.

Conclusion

The key focus of this article is on the growth of neo-liberal ideology in social life and the ways in which neo-liberalism has co-opted the trends in adult and community education in order to further its own economic agenda, subduing counter-cultural critical voices in the process. Further, it proposed that communitarianism has been supported in national strategic plans in order to mitigate the worst effects of neo-liberalism without constraining or regulating the market economy. Finally, it suggests that it is still possible to reclaim the progress of the knowledge society for the benefit of civil society rather than the economy, through the work of critical pedagogy and drawing on liberatory social movements and feminist scholarship.

In the article, I sketched the wide scope of the adult and community education world, drawing on the influential policy formation role in the European Community and Commission, particularly, and the texts derived from the newly emerging interest in lifelong learning. The review then focused on the Irish context, which has been highly influenced by the developments in Europe, but with a clear distinct identity, probably unique to Ireland, due to history and culture. The context in Ireland is illuminating, in that mainstream education is in a severe crisis at present, and critical educators are almost completely voiceless in the debate. However, adult and community education is an arena which subverts the traditional boundaries, crossing between communitarianism, new social movements, and feminist critical education. Critical adult and community educators are optimistic and confident that social transformation is not only possible, but the struggle for liberation strengthens the resolve to bring about a just and equal society.

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