The Future is Unwritten: Democratic adult education against and beyond neoliberalism

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Abstract

The paper discusses the value of imagination in educational debate and makes an argument for Irish adult educators making space and time to envisage a range of possible futures for the field beyond the terms offered in current policy. It explores this topic in relation to neoliberal educational reform and the broader social context. The second half outlines one possible future- adult education for a participatory democracy and sketches out some of what this might entail both in principle and in practice.

Keywords: imagination, learning theory, neoliberalism, democracy, critical realism, critical pedagogy

Introduction

The cultural critic Said (1994, p. 401) once remarked that education needed to be transformed in order to match "the new economic and socio-political dislocations and configurations of our time with the startling realities of human interdependence". Developing new forms of education which can adequately meet the challenges of a rapidly changing, fragile and interdependent world is no small task and achieving this will require a sustained collective effort of both the imagination and the intellect. Yet the impact of crisis, austerity and recent shifts in policy is making this type of effort, which depends on imagining a *range* of possible futures, very difficult in Irish adult education. Important and necessary debates surrounding policy are already taking place but we also need to open up a related but distinct discussion which explicitly moves beyond the terms offered in policy to explore alternative futures for adult education. The first half of the article explains why I think that imaginative and ambitious proposals are needed in the current socio-political conjuncture. In the second part

I will sketch out one possible future, albeit in a very provisional and incomplete way, and argue that adult education can help build and sustain a genuinely participatory democracy from a perspective based on a synthesis of critical realist ideas, cultural studies and critical pedagogy (Bhaskar, 1978; Engestrom, 1987; Freire, 1998; Wainwright, 2009; Williams, 1961; Wright, 2010).

Imagining a range of educational futures

I want to begin with the argument articulated in a recent book (Barnett, 2013) in which he makes a compelling and persuasive case for exercising our imaginations in a bolder and more sustained fashion in thinking about education. Barnett is especially interested in how we can encourage each other, both as individual educators and as a field as a whole, to "leap beyond the familiar" (2013, p. 15). Doing this, he argues, allows us "to see into things, to feel into things, to be at one with things anew to produce a new understanding of the object of imagination" (2013, p. 25). It is important to note that Barnett is not inviting educators to indulge in pointless daydreaming or idle speculation. On the contrary he argues we need to look at the field with careful attention but that in doing this we should also give ourselves license to go beyond the given and the 'self-evident' to ask ourselves what we think education has the potential to do. In other words Barnett is saying that we need to think imaginatively about what the education system might develop into in the future as well as what it is already doing or meant to be achieving.

Calling for a greater degree of openness in educational debate may seem a rather vague suggestion but Barnett is alerting us to something very important which is all too easily overlooked in the current political and cultural climate. In common with other educational thinkers (Freire, 1998; Greene, 1995) he is making a claim that open, imaginative exploration is an integral element of critical thinking and is crucial to pedagogical innovation and institutional reform.

According to Barnett renewing a sense of possibility is doubly important because so much of contemporary educational thinking displays a distinct "imaginative reticence" (2013, p.17). What lies behind this winnowing of the educational imagination? One explanation, offered by Barnett is that the growth of an audit culture which is obsessed with measurement that encourages educators to hold tightly to the familiar and cleave to the immediately applicable. Biesta (2010) concurs with this diagnosis and discerns a major discursive shift in recent years. The overwhelming focus is now on the *how* of education – pedagogical tips and techniques, progression routes, models of assessment and

so forth – and this has crowded out thinking in any depth about *why* we educate and what we hope to achieve through education. Questions about the purpose of education are being ignored and we have become preoccupied by "technical and managerial questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of processes, not what these processes are for" (Biesta, 2010, p. 2). This has diminished our sense of how educational work relates to broader social issues and also skates over the complex, multi-layered reality of how adults actually learn. Above all it closes down an exploration of what sort of new knowledge and practices might emerge in and through education.

The narrow horizon of the neoliberal imagination

There are a range of reasons why this has happened but it is hardly coincidental that this narrowing of the educational imagination has occurred in a period in which there has been a remarkable drive to marketize education across the globe (Ball, 2007). This is part of a much larger neoliberal project (Harvey, 2005). The main features of the free market gospel are now very familiar indeed; competitiveness and flexibility must be maintained whatever the social cost and that extending the reach of markets in *all* areas of social life will create wealth and maximize individual choice and we should allow markets to regulate society as a whole. The idea that market exchange between individuals is the basic building block of human interaction and that such exchanges somehow organically coalesces into complex forms of social organisation is remarkably simplistic and not at all credible in either historical or anthropological terms. As Polanyi (2001) argues there has been enormous variation in how markets are organised and embedded within broader society through history.

Nevertheless, market fundamentalism has had an enormous influence on politics, culture and society including in education which is now often treated as a frontier of the market society, another area of human activity which needs to be made manageable in order to follow "the calculating and objectifying logic of economy" (Vandergehe, 2014, p. 285). Consequently markets and quasi-markets have been created in many parts of the education system but perhaps more important than this are the changes in how policy describes what education does and is supposed to do (Ball, 2007). Students are increasingly viewed as customers and educational institutions are expected, especially in Further Education and Training (FET) and HE, to justify what they do in marketised terms.

It is worth considering how this shift is linked to particular modes of assessment in adult education. In a fascinating study Allais (2014) does exactly that

and traces how free market ideas have begun to shape how policymakers choose to describe knowledge, learning and qualifications across the world. Allais goes on to describe the four major characteristics of these policies: 1) remarkably high expectations of education and what might be achieved through market driven educational reform, 2) a strong focus on tightening links between labour markets and education, 3) a belief that the quality and the quantity of education can be rapidly improved through such reforms and 4) that this reform agenda can be most effectively pursued by changes in curriculum and assessment. This has led to what she believes is an 'extraordinary development': namely that in the past 20 years the number of countries involved in developing outcomes based qualifications systems has mushroomed from 20 to 120 (Allais, 2014, p.2). The aim of these reforms is to make education more 'responsive ' to business and significantly this is presented and justified as being more 'learner centred' (Allais, 2014).

I want to foreground two things in particular. First of all that the adoption of the new(ish) watchwords in education of competition, employability, mobility, flexibility and the creation of vast complex machinery to measure competences and outcomes is bound to a wider neoliberal project. Secondly, these changes in policy priorities and frameworks of assessment have had an impact and reconfigured, at least partially, how we imagine society and education. Thin, brittle and highly instrumental conceptions of education have become remarkably influential and we appear, to paraphrase the poet Lorca (2001), to have become mired in a world of laws and figures in which learning and knowledge are treated simply as static, commodifiable goods. We are encouraged to think of education in terms of credentials possessed by individuals that are primarily, or solely, a means to an end (Allais, 2014). This highly utilitarian and intensely ideological approach to education impoverishes our capacity to discuss the complex and multidimensional nature of learning and offers no language for exploring how education might be used to create higher levels of social equality.

But I want to go beyond a critique of the limitations of market orientated conceptions of education and the sort of commentary which treat neoliberalism as a completed, successful and uncontested project. In the wake of the financial crisis and the austerity that followed, the cracks in what Polanyi (2001) has termed the 'stark utopia' of a market-led society, are now very evident (Graeber, 2013; Mellor, 2011: Sayer, 2015). After forty years of neoliberal governments we can also say something about the long term impact of neoliberalism on economy, politics and culture.

- Neoliberalism has not delivered the 'rising tide' that market reforms were supposed to deliver (Harvey, 2005). Globally "seven out ten people live in countries where economic inequality has increased in the last 30 years" and where "46% of the world's wealth is owned by just 1%" (Sayer, 2015, p. 7).

- The deregulation of markets has led to the explosive growth of new forms of financial speculation over which there is very little democratic oversight or control (Mellor, 2011).

- Transnational corporations (TNCs) have become far more powerful entities in the global economy part of which stems from an increased nobility of capital (Harvey, 2010). Again there are clear limits in making these bodies socially accountable.

- International bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have extended the reach of neoliberalism through trade agreements and demanding free market reform in nation states even when the majority of the population oppose this (Harvey, 2005, 2010).

- Attacks on collectivist organisations such as trade unions and the promotion of competitive individualism in all social spheres have weakened social solidarity (Harvey, 2005).

The cumulative effect has been a remarkable consolidation in elite power in terms of wealth and the capacity to influence decision making (Sayer, 2015) and this has created a global 'democratic deficit'. But as Wainwright (2009, p. xx) notes when 'old institutions fail, people invent' and new forms of democratic political engagement are being developed across the world in response to the social and ecological crises caused by capitalism. "Something new is happening –something new in content depth, breadth and global consistency" as millions have taken to the streets to demand a reimaging of democracy (Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014, p. 5). The best known example is the Occupy movement but this is only one example of a much wider trend observable in Europe, Africa and especially Latin America (Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014; Zibechi, 2012). And while there is a lot of overheated rhetoric about new technologies, the capacity for grassroots organisation and communicative exchange across local, national, transnational, continental and global fora is now much enhanced (Castells, 2009). Significantly these movements for democracy and against neoliberalism have also led to experiments in forms of democratic education (Apple, 2013; Tett, 2002; Zibechi, 2012).

So when one looks at trends in adult education policy and one casts an eye across a global landscape marked by neoliberal crisis and a ferment of grassroots activity much of which is explicitly linked to experiments in democratic education, the need for extended debate on a range of possible futures for adult education becomes clearer and more concrete.

Irish adult education in a time of austerity and change

This global picture is directly relevant to where we now stand in Irish adult education. The Irish state has vigorously courted international corporate investment and over the past twenty five years we have seen market deregulation, financialisation, the commodification of public services and goods and to a lesser extent the privatisation of state companies (Kirby, 2010; McCabe, 2011). But it should be noted Irish neoliberalism also had quite specific characteristics not least that during the 1990s there was a rise in average income (Kirby, 2010). The nature of social partnership in Ireland also meant that government policies were consensual in tone and combined progressive rhetoric about eradicating poverty with concerns about flexibility and competitive economic advantage (for example in the *National Development Plans*). While the boom lasted, inequalities in power and wealth could be presented as a marginal or even a residual social phenomenon of little concern to a busy, consumer society in which we were culturally reinventing the meaning of being Irish (Kirby *et al.* 2002).

In line with international policy imperatives, education was tasked with tackling these 'residual' inequalities as well as improving the stock of human capital. The adoption of lifelong learning policies (DES, 2000) made it seem as if adult education, long 'the poor cousin' of the education system, might turn out to be Cinderella. But now we know that Cinderella never went to the ball and the expansion of education did very little to tackle enduring social inequalities. Crisis and austerity policies led to the decimation of the community sector (Harvey, 2012) and there has been a major reorganisation and reorientation of adult education through the creation of SOLAS. Adult education is now firmly orientated to employability based on the proposition that enhancing human capital will create jobs and strengthen social inclusion. Recent changes have given rise to very serious concerns about the narrowing of educational focus based on a highly instrumental approach to outcomes and competences (Murray *et al.* 2014). I would argue that these policy shifts are clearly in line with the trends outlined by Allais (2014) and it appears that in the Irish context, a crisis in neoliberalism has intensified the reach of neoliberal ideas. Notably it

has also seen the fading away of a minor, but significant, theme in earlier adult education policy, i.e. democratic citizenship (DES, 2000). Thus the conditions for a further narrowing educational imagination are quite advanced.

A number of people have responded by offering a critical analysis of the influence of neoliberalism on educational policy (Finnegan, 2008; Grummell, 2007; Murray *et al.* 2014). There is also a good deal of other research, much of which has been disseminated through this Journal that documents the value of a broad non-instrumental version of adult education through case studies and historical reviews. But there is a comparatively small amount of material which stands back from policy debates and sketches out what we might hope for in the future (e.g. Fleming, 1998; Connolly & Hussey, 2013 etc.). For intellectual, practical and political reasons I think it is important that we outline possible lines of development in the field and offer clear explanations of the principles that underpin this. It is only through a *future orientated debate* in which we discuss the adequacy, scope and depth of various proposals that we can really begin "to develop a coherent and credible theory of alternatives to existing institutions and social structures" (Wright, 2010, p.20). It is in that spirit that I want to now briefly outline one such suggestion.

One possible future: education in a participatory and egalitarian democracy

I think one possibility open to adult education, which to my mind is both desirable and feasible, is that it focuses on how to build and sustain a participatory democracy animated by a broad and substantive notion of human flourishing. I am especially interested in how vibrant, dynamic spaces of learning can provide people with opportunities for personal and social development and produce knowledge and foster practices which can deepen democracy.

This is not an idiosyncratic or an original proposition and has been voiced before in *The Adult Learner* (see especially the 2005 special edition, Fleming, 1998; Connolly & Hussey, 2013). More generally if we take a historical perspective on the evolution and development of adult education we discover the *desire* for a genuinely democratic education runs like a golden thread right through the history of the field (Rose, 2001; Tett, 2002; Williams, 1961). Moreover, democratic *practice* has been a constitutive feature of adult education and it is one of the things that unifies a seemingly disparate field across continents and through time. Both desire and practice are bound to an *ideal* and the hope that education can play a part in creating societies which provide people with the conditions and resources necessary to live dignified and flourishing lives. In fact in a very

profound sense most of what we know as adult education today is the product of several centuries of democratic ferment (Williams, 1961). It is often forgotten that democracy was not a gift but was struggled for by social movements –such as the workers movement, feminists and civil rights organisations – who have demanded that society be run on more equal terms (Eley, 2002). The history of adult education in inextricably bound up with these sorts of movements and it can be argued that the great achievement of adult education "is that it kept this ambition to be something other than the consequence of change and to become part of its process" (Williams, 1990, p. 157).

History can only offer clues about what adult education might become though. To move forward we need to be precise about our core principles today especially as democracy as a word can mean so many things (Held, 1996). Typically, we most readily associate the word with what we know about representative democracies and the institutions, bodies of law and procedures in modern states but, as Graeber (2013, p. 186) notes, participatory democracy means something more than this and "is not necessarily defined by majority vote: it is, rather, the process of collective deliberation on the principle of full and equal participation". This dual focus on collective deliberation and equality is absolutely crucial. This form of cooperation depends on reasoned argument *and* solidarity and as Dewey argued "democracy is more than government; it is primarily a form of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (1916, p. 68). Just as importantly, Dewey and other commentators (Honneth & Farrell, 1998; Wainwright, 2009) insist that democracy should ideally involve deliberation across a *wide variety of public spheres.* This 'thick' version of democracy thus seeks the participation of citizens in decision making well outside the bounded and tidily defined arenas of traditional politics such as council chambers, TV studios and parliaments. In its most complete form, participatory democracy would involve citizens deliberating on issues in local communities, educational institutions and workplaces as well as having some sort of say in national and transnational institutions. The ultimate goal is to move towards a society in which citizens have "equal, effective possibility of participating in legislating, governing, and judging, and in the last analysis, in instituting society" (Castoriadis, 2010, p. 3).

Democracy is therefore seen as an ethical, political and practical project. It is perhaps useful to think of this form of democracy as open-ended and as a set of practices and ideas that call for "perpetual work of self-correction" (Ranciere, 2007, p 42). As Dewey (1916) suggests this means democracy is above all an

experimental form of social cooperation in which institutions evolve and change. Within the terms I have outlined here an integral part of this work of deliberation and self-correction is to seek out and break down social, cultural and economic barriers to citizens' full participation. A major task for any participatory democracy then is to "identify the ways in which existing social institutions and social structures impose harms on people" (Wright, 2010, p. 11). This also requires careful deliberation on how, with finite resources, a society can allow for 'the expansion of the "capabilities" of persons to lead the lives they value- and have reason to value' (Sen, 1999, p. 18). This work, I believe, is impossible without a multidimensional conception of equality which explores how access to cultural and economic resources and valued social practices contribute to human development (Baker *et al.*, 2009). As feminists have long argued this means fully acknowledging the centrality of love, solidarity and care for social well-being and seeking to identify and foster the social and institutional arrangements that support and enhance these things (Kittay, 1999; Lynch *et al.*, 2009). One other point should be noted: establishing equality and democracy as mutually dependent principles does not mean effacing difference or always seeking consensus. Rather an open, experimental, dialogical form of social organisation needs a high level of "disagreement and conflict" (Douzinas, 2013, p.114).

The role of learning in a participatory democracy

As the adult educator and cultural critic Raymond Williams (1961) notes creating a 'thick' form of democracy is a formidable and even a daunting task. But he also argues that if we believe humans are "essentially [...] learning, creating and communicating" beings, this may well be the only adequate form of social organisation available (Williams, 1961, p.118). According to Williams in participatory democracy learning, the fundamental human capacity for self-monitoring, adaptation and change, should become far more central and "human learning [should be approached] in a genuinely open way, as the most valuable resource we have and therefore as something which we should have to produce a special argument to limit rather than a special argument to extend" (Williams, 1961, p.168). For Williams a democratic society is by definition a learning society where the *collective* capacity for cultural invention is more fully utilised. It is only by marshalling critical, highly reflexive forms of learning that we can reorganise social practices in a way that contribute to human flourishing (Engestrom, 1987).

Clearly what is being suggested here is that a 'thick' version of democracy *requires* innovative and participatory forms of education (Dewey, 1916; Wainwright,

2009). A learning society is above all a problem posing society which knows how to organise and encourage highly reflexive learning. Democracy – based on full participation and meaningful deliberation – has to be learnt and relearnt, practiced and questioned, tested and redefined on a variety of different scales and settings. This means creating space in which new practices and novel forms of knowledge and understanding can emerge. From this perspective adult education is not a defined sector but a set of practices that encourage participation and critical reflection and that help create connective tissue of dialogical learning across various social spaces. For this to occur in a systematic way participants need to take ownership over how learning occurs in a given situation and explore the contradictions that any learning process inevitably produces. The Finnish learning theorist Engestrom (2001, p.2) calls this 'expansive learning' and argues that very rich forms of reflexive learning "begins with individual subjects questioning the accepted practice" and the tools, concepts and practices are there which allow it to "gradually expands into a collective movement or institution". This emphasis on learning in a non-linear way through a group is completely distinct from the focus on predictable outcomes and shifts emphatically away from the individualistic version of 'learner centredness' adult education. It also implies that experiential learning is only one single, albeit crucial, element of rich learning.

What is being imagined is adult education conducted in egalitarian, caring, experimental, interdisciplinary spaces where experiential, disciplinary, technical and emancipatory knowledges are recombined in novel forms in a highly reflexive way. This also involves looking for ways to ensure educators and institutions are genuinely accountable to students and broader civil society including grassroots democratic campaigns. Ultimately that means giving people, on local, regional and national levels, real control – including budgetary powers – over education (Apple, 2013).

Conclusion or departure point?

The article has made five intentionally broad arguments which are interlinked with each other. Firstly, the times we are living in calls for new forms of education and that an integral part of creating something new is imaginatively exploring what *might* be possible. Secondly, neoliberalism and the linked phenomenon of outcomes based assessment have narrowed the educational imagination. Thirdly, the political, economic and cultural effects of neoliberalism have led to a deep crisis in democracy. Fourthly, across the globe a wave of social movements against neoliberalism have emerged which have been animated by a

concern with democracy and democratic education and this fact is directly pertinent to imagining alternative futures for adult education. Fifthly, if we want democracy to be at the heart of adult education we have to be clear what we mean and to open up a debate on what is denoted when we use this somewhat slippy term. As a contribution to this I have outlined one way of viewing participatory democracy and adult education.

My aim here is to shift the primary focus, however temporarily, from the limitations and obstacles we face and anticipate how adult education could contribute to creative and expansive forms of learning. In a period of cuts and insecurity as well as major policy changes this may seem hard to envisage. But democratic and participatory adult education has, and is, taking place in various settings and on various scales. We have at our disposal a deep reservoir of collective knowledge on how to build educational relationships which are democratic and egalitarian and considerable expertise in creating curricula in a dialogical way so that people can find their voice and name their world (Connolly & Hussey, 2013; Freire, 1998; Tett, 2002). Adult educators already know how to combine political and contextual analysis and to synthesise the various types of learning and knowledges in a participatory manner. To bring these resources into the future depends on vibrant practitioner networks, active trade unions, community groups and others meeting in open fora to discuss and debate what might be possible. The article is intended as an invitation to other practitioners to discuss and debate this and other future orientated proposals.

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