

‘Really Useful Research’ for real equality and justice in adult and community education

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Abstract

In recent decades, adult and community education has emerged as a distinctive discipline in its own right, based on scholarship in the quest for real equality and social justice. This distinctive discipline is already characterised by ‘really useful practice’, that is, critical, creative pedagogy, heavily influenced by women’s studies and women’s community education. Further, it draws on ‘really useful knowledge’, the co-creation of knowledge for critical consciousness. I make the case that we in the field need to develop a distinctive research approach to underpin the discipline, ‘really useful research’ that is dedicated to promoting emancipation, addressing inequality and inequity, in order to counter the ways in which research has been employed in maintaining the status quo. The article argues that research is not neutral, as feminist research approaches has demonstrated so clearly. And research has been used in a reductionist and instrumental manner, to implement global agendas for private gain rather than public good. Critical adult and community educators are dedicated to real equality and social justice, and ‘really useful research’ will provide the wherewithal to works towards that end.

Keywords: Emergence of the Discipline, Gender Equality, Social Justice, ‘Really Useful Knowledge’, ‘Really Useful Practice’, Emancipatory Research

Introduction

When Thompson developed the notion of ‘really useful knowledge’ (1996) for the purpose of linking the practice of working with adults to the radical foundational ethos, she provided the kindling needed to develop the scholarly engagement with the field. At that time, in the mid-nineties in Ireland, there were comparatively few scholars in adult and community education, a mere handful at doctoral level with considerably more at masters level, while the field

itself was blossoming with ‘really useful practice’ (Connolly and Hussey, 2013). While there was a deficit in scholarly engagement, the practice was vibrant, innovative and creative. And that field was – and still is – central in transforming people’s lives and developing their capacity to participate more fully and critically in society, as it emerges as a discipline in its own right, rather than a sub-set or safety net of formal education.

In the intervening twenty years, the scholarly landscape has changed fundamentally. There is a distinct movement in scholarly reflection on that practice, theorising it and contributing to the development of the distinctive discipline of adult and community education. However, this is not without a bit of a tussle. We’re in the middle of a territorial struggle for the hearts and minds of learners. I maintain that a powerful research agenda has been used to influence social policy to quell critical development and education. This arguably aims to promote a specific economic and political agenda. This agenda bears all the hallmarks of the neo-liberal project, and its key objectives are market-led privatisation, individualism and freedom from oversight. The outcomes of this agenda are the diminution of the responsibility of the state towards the public good and wellbeing of the population. This means that state-sponsored or supported initiatives are under threat as an unnecessary draw on public finances, and simultaneously, the response to social needs are pushed towards market led solutions. Macrine holds that the incursion of private gain into the public good of education means that the focus has shifted from the well-being and development of humanity and society to a reduction of human worth to the economic value of labour of individuals in the neo-liberal context (Macrine, 2009).

In Ireland, Hurley finds that this prevails in the enactment of adult and community education, particularly as it finds itself trammelled into labour activation together with narrow learning outcomes, tremendously out of step with broad social outcomes (Hurley, 2015).

In this article, I’m making the case for a deeper development of ‘really useful research’ in order to create a stronger, more secure base to ensure the future of the field of adult and community education. I want to address, in particular, the implications of the territorial struggle between critical social development agenda of scholar-practitioners in the field against the state-sponsored, but market-led labour activation agenda. To this end, I will endeavour to review the nexus between ‘really useful knowledge’ and ‘really useful practice’ through the lens of ‘really useful research’, in order to reflect on the value of that schol-

arly engagement to Irish society. And I argue that this nexus needs to include an explicit gender and intersectional dimensions. If it ignores gender, it will overlook the fundamental power structures at work in society, that is, patriarchal power.

'Really Useful Knowledge'

Interrogation of Patriarchal Power

When we consider our assumptions about the nature and scope of knowledge that persisted until the 1960s, it seems as if we, as ordinary citizens, were at the mercy of pronouncements handed down from on high, with no status or value given to our subjective experience or reflection. The scholars and elites who made those pronouncements drew from disciplines that relied on rational argument, documentation, hypotheses and empirical testing and proof, such as theology, philosophy, history and science. And they created the foundations for the way society was organised. Thus, the belief that women were inferior, irrational, second class citizens or incomplete men was based on the theology of the Christian sects, which in turn was shaped by western philosophy. This was practically unchallenged until the second wave women's movement, in the 1960s. These assumptions prevailed in spite of the work of Weber and Marx on class stratification. Women's studies were – and arguably still are – the most revolutionary field of academic pursuit, under various names and designations, including gender and feminist studies and women's community education. Women's studies are also responsible for creating the model for other areas interested in equality, such as, of course, intersectionality, equality studies, Men's Studies, LGBTQI studies, community education, equality and social activism studies. These other areas import and adapt models from women's studies into these arenas, including starting where people are at; critical, feminist pedagogy; non-traditional content; and the central process, consciousness raising.

Crucially, without women's studies, there would be little or no interrogation of patriarchy. Patriarchy, the system of rule based on the power, authority and control of a dominating figure, whether by birth, race, ethnicity, fatherhood, conquest, election, selection, corruption or by any means, has to be recognised as being responsible for the sub-ordination and oppression of women (Walby, 1990), and all other sub-ordinate groups and categories. While Walby focuses on the role of patriarchy in the subjugation of women, Weber framed it in male, generational terms, the authority of the traditional head of the household, that is, the stronger male patriarch rules over weaker men and boys (Weber, 1964), which is extrapolated to understand the role it plays in perpetuating class stratification, imperialism, colonisation and all the other situations where a

dominant male rules all others. Nevertheless, it is the feminist interrogation of patriarchy has been taken up by pro-feminist masculinities theorists, such as Raewyn Connell and Jeff Hearn. The impact of the dominant male leads to the emasculation of so-called weaker, that is, less dominant males, to perpetuate his own power, in addition to the oppression of all women and children.

Significantly, Connell maintains that this construction of hegemonic masculinities is *entirely* responsible for the crises among so many young men, with disastrous suicide levels, self-destruction and alienation, in spite of anti-feminist claims that it is due to the loss of place and identity brought about by the women's movement. Connell acknowledges that the interrogation of masculinities and the relationship of hegemonic masculinities with patriarchy is due to the focus on gender-based inequality raised by women's studies (2005) and she and her colleague have continued to explore the concept (Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005). Hearn frames the proliferation of hegemonic masculinities in global capitalism as an extension of – not in competition with – the women's studies focus on the analysis of power (Hearn, 2015). That is, this interrogation of patriarchal power opens the door to examine basic structures in society, not just gender relations, but also the organisation of society as it impacts on everyone, benefitting some groups and disadvantaging others. 'Really useful knowledge', created and exposed by women's studies, provides the tools for the interrogation of basic systems of power and control, alongside wider discussions about inequality and inequity in society. In order to understand where 'really useful knowledge' stems from, it is necessary to go back to the basics, that of subjective experience and reflection. The next section will explore that in more detail in order to lay the foundations for my contention for 'really useful research'.

Life Experience and Reflection: Freire and Feminism

Rational objectivity still holds a powerful place in our understanding of society. The citations of numbers and statistics are the most common way for research to be reported. Measurability and calculations are considered the most accurate gauge of human condition and predictability and it is based on the idea that some people can stand apart and uncover or discover truth and facts about the social world. This has a higher status in the hierarchy of knowledge than subjectivity. However, objectivity has been challenged fundamentally by women's studies, by listening to otherwise silenced voices (Connolly, 2003). But, firstly, it is vital to contextualise this within the practice of adult and community education.

Freire has been central to the emergence of adult and community education as a distinct discipline. His work on literacy education made an immeasurable impact on the philosophy of education, challenging fundamentally epistemology as handed down by the elites, by re-positioning the place of lived experience and practice. In Ireland, in the 1980s, Steiner-Scott clearly recognised the place of experience and reflection involved in the questioning the norms within women's lives, with her contention that we, women, gain insight into our own condition by sharing the insights with other women (1985). While feminist scholarship was beginning to blossom, it was confined behind the walls of the academy, while most people's lives were lived in the harsh reality of everyday life. Mary Cullen, with her invaluable edited collection *Girls Don't Do Honours*, highlighted the absence of women in higher education and the constraints visited upon girls in mainstream education but also the absence of women in the sciences at that time (Cullen, 1987). And while women's history and women's literature in particular, was emerging with a stronger voice, the insights from everyday life was not granted the value or status that might render it fit subjects for research, until the birth of women's studies as an interdisciplinary endeavour.

The insights garnered from the experience of oppression and subjugation were hardly researched in the academy, but appeared more readily in literature and popular culture. For example, *The Feminine Mystique*, (Friedan, 1963) *The Female Eunuch*, (Greer, 1970) and *The Women's Room* (French, 1977), were bestselling books, and probably had much more impact on the women's movement than academic research. Literature has the power to immerse the readers in people's lived lives, in ways that academic research fails, or perhaps does inadequately, at least until the innovation of women's studies.

Thus, the development of women's studies was the educational response to the women's liberation movement, that is, adult education for liberation (Connolly, *et al*, 1996). Not simply an academic engagement with rational argument, observable phenomena and traditional justifications, but rather the experiential, reflexive, immersion within a consciousness-raising environment. These consciousness-raising groups characterised the second wave women's liberation movement, in parallel to the process that Freire termed *conscientization*. Indeed, it is striking the extent that those early Freirean literacy based pedagogical thoughts (1972) echo and share ground with the early women's studies, in the 1960s. Freire subsequently owned up to the androcentrism of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, though, while women's studies put a gender analysis at the heart of the field. That is, women's studies challenged the androcentrism and

so-called rationality of canonical knowledge, with the intention of creating new knowledge for the emancipation of women as well as men, what Johnson called 'really useful knowledge' (1988) and developed over time by Jane Thompson in many places (1980, 1983, 1996, 2006).

Crucially, the knowledge-base stems from the life experience of women in society, as an oppressed and unequal population. Moreover, while women's studies acknowledge the validity and authority of personal experience, it transforms this individual perspective into a social perspective, from the 'I' to the collective group or perhaps more accurately, the loose, heterogeneous category. It makes the connections between the personal and the political as the AONTAS Women's Education Group contended in 1992. Further, it also interrogates existing knowledge through a feminist lens, as well as validating new topics and new ways of knowing. This living, vibrant example of 'really useful knowledge' is entirely relevant today, not just for the liberation of women but also for the acknowledgment of the humanity of children as well as the rest of the population. Indeed, women's studies provide the model for many social movements dealing with everything from climate change to the recent Marriage Equality Referendum. Adult education owes so much to so many women and men whose rights were acknowledged and vindicated in this referendum, a revolution which kicked off in the 1960s, with the revolution in knowledge creation. In the next section, I want to consider the role of civil and human rights, participative democracy and the ways in which people engage with radical knowledge, that is, through what I call 'Really Useful Practice'.

'Really Useful Practice'

Participative democracy in action

Practitioners in the field of adult and community education are guided by a democratic and participative ethos. In this, they have developed ways of working that confronts traditional educator-learner relationships. But it confronts also the wider structures and practices in education, not just that dyad of the teacher-student. That dyad is a reductive construction of education, which frames education almost entirely within the skills and competences of individual teachers rather than the social institution that is shaped and controlled by much wider discourses in society. A principle concern of professional teachers is discipline within the classroom, while the principle concern of students (and their parents, in the case of schooling) is good or bad teachers and their role in enabling students to achieve 'good' results. When we think of this dynamic in any other context, for example, in the family, in the community or the work-

place, it is clear that we don't reduce the social institutions to the behaviour of the individuals involved. We see them in much more complex terms, in terms of culture, socialisation, norms and values, rather than conduct isolated from the wider social conditions.

'Really useful practice' is part of that discussion (Connolly, Hussey, 2013; Connolly, 2008). That is, it sees the interaction in the learning environment in those wider social terms, from power and control to internalised cultural and traditional norms and values. It includes the welcome into the space, the fun and respect that ensures that prospective learners feel at home and at ease, overcoming the imposter syndrome that many people report in unfamiliar surroundings. The imposter syndrome is often seen as the problem of the person experiencing the unease, but that it has more to do with the surroundings, rather than the individual. AONTAS identifies a number of elements that are essential in the practice of women's community education in *Flower Power* (2009) and these elements form a fundamental part of 'really useful practice', including supportive environments, accessible, holistic and intercultural provision. While these elements could be framed as individualistic participant-centred, they are contextualised within the wider 'really useful knowledge', with the ultimate aim to bring about emancipatory change in Ireland.

Civil and Human Rights Social Movements

While the *Flower Power* guide to practice is specifically oriented towards women's community education, it is also an exemplar for wider adult and community education practice. As Peter Hussey and I discussed in our article in 2013, critical educators work with learners at all levels, and in very diverse groups. It is the responsibility of the educators to pay attention to these human rights issues. But further, 'really useful practice' also includes micro details which ensures that democracy and participation is part of the learning process, such as the use of group work, discussion and an active interrogation of the teacher-learner dynamic. While educators such as myself were quite gormless to start with, nevertheless, our practice was shaped by an equality agenda, new ideas that emerged again in the 1960s, with the civil and human rights revolution.

Any review of the civil and human rights movement indicates that it is still a work in progress. While social movements are counter to traditional politics as they developed in Ireland after the foundation of the state, nevertheless, the movements have been very influential in equality legislation, albeit in a limited way, when we consider the inequality that persists in spite of the legislation.

However, while limited, that influence has been underpinned by research that aims to bring about emancipatory change, that is, ‘really useful research’.

‘Really Useful Research’

Do you believe in equality?

Hesse-Biber recounts an opening activity that she used in her classroom of undergraduate students. As she introduces herself, she asks the students:

‘Do you believe in equality?’ Response: Everyone’s hand goes up.

‘Do you believe in justice?’ Response: All eagerly raise hands.

‘Are you a feminist?’ Response: Stark silence ensues, as some students slowly begin to raise their hands. (2014:1)

This demonstrates the fundamental struggle in the fight for equality. When this struggle touches on controversial points – controversial in terms of discourses in mainstream society – there is almost involuntary recoiling, a contention that some struggles go ‘too far’. This reaction applies right across the board, from Travellers rights, to the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.

This has practically always applied to women’s liberation. For example, the ICA (The Irish Countrywomen’s Association) has been at the forefront of adult education with purpose-built facilities and programmes aimed at meeting the learners’ needs. This sounds like the perfect set-up, but the ICA has expressed distaste and disdain for women’s liberation, claiming that it goes too far, (TG4, 2016). Of course, I acknowledge the huge benefit that the ICA has opened to the women of Ireland, and I am not demonising the organisation but it is important to differentiate between real equality and reformation of the status quo.

Do you believe in justice?

The commitment to justice characterises a lot social relationships in Irish society, from civil rights to schooling to taxation; indeed, it’s inherent in many social institutions. However, the looseness of the concept and the various interpretations taken up ensures that the commitment is dissipated. But since Thompson made the call to arms in 1996, it is more straightforward to clarify the concept within the adult and community education context and scholarship in creating ‘really useful knowledge’ to achieve justice and equality in Ireland has blossomed.

This scholarship has led the way in highlighting the importance of adult education and the place of adult learners in the panoply of education as a public good. The scholarship has built on – and with – the work of national organisations including AONTAS and NALA, the work of Adult and Community Education, and the work of Adult Education Officers, Adult Literacy Officers, Community Education Facilitators along with numerous dedicated and committed adult educators and providers.

However, the validation of knowledge creation is still a site of struggle. While there is clarity about and some commitment to the place of research in changing the world as Marx posited, there is still a vibrant dialogue about the nature of that research and the conceptual world-views that underpin research for emancipation. One such debate occurs around evidence-based research. Evidence-based research has asserted itself as perhaps the only valid source of information and knowledge on which decisions and policy should be based. It is an approach that was developed for the health care disciplines, to challenge traditional practices and to create new knowledge based on data and scientific findings (Brown, Crawford and Hicks, 2003). This approach is characterised by the gathering of quantitative data that covers a lot of ground but perhaps not a lot of detail. The promotion of evidence-based research appears in many areas and it carries a lot of weight with powerful institutions, in spite of the reservations that feminist researchers have about it. Most importantly, it is prey to agendas that serve purposes other than emancipation and social justice. A recent publication, the evaluation of the *Back To Education Allowance programme*, is an example of research that has gathered evidence and concluded that the programme is not effective in enabling participants to move on to work or education (Kelly, *et al*, 2015). It is too early to tell what impact this research will have on the practice in the field, but it is fairly damning.

However, most significantly, the research did not address why people within the programme didn't progress in more impressive numbers. For practitioners working in the field, this is the most important question, and it could illuminate the kind of disadvantages and burdens that the participants have to carry with them as a result of early school leaving, learning difficulties, neglect and disadvantage that could have built up over a lifetime. It is completely unrealistic as well as lacking in compassion and understanding to expect that a lifetime of marginalisation could be redressed in a very short educational intervention, relatively speaking.

This was the case in the rationalisation of the community development programme in the years around 2008-2010. This programme was evaluated by the

Centre for Effective Services, on behalf of the Department Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, again, relying on evidence-based research. However, the CES misleadingly framed community development as the provider of services rather than a grassroots movement. While it may be difficult to synthesise the definitions of community development in a phrase, it is clearly positioned as a social process whereby people identify their needs, especially around poverty, exclusion and disadvantage, and work together to respond to those needs, rather than a service provider such as a bank or post office. Therefore, it was not surprising that evidence-based research found community development as deficient in terms of delivering services (Bamber, *et al*, 2009), because it was looking for evidence of efficient or effective service provision rather than the empowerment of local people. However, this finding provided the instrument to withdraw support for the programme as it was practiced on the ground, by depriving it of funding.

This is just one example of the frailty of a trend or style and it can apply to any new idea that sweeps in to fashion and becomes the new 'best practice'. However, the real learning from this example is to interrogate the panoply of research approaches to arrive at a conclusion, however conditional, for what would constitute 'really useful research' and the quest to bring about fair, just and equal outcomes. As Freire might say, evidence-based research is not neutral.

Debates and Paradigms

Knowledge created through 'really useful research' is critical knowledge, that which is capable of raising consciousness about the wider social contexts and which is intent on contributing towards equality. However, even within research, there are differences that help us to understand the power of research. One of the most profound is probably that of the either/or dilemma posed by the dualistic framing of qualitative in opposition to quantitative approaches, the so-called paradigm wars. While this discussion has led to an appreciation of qualitative research, quantitative research also has a place in 'really useful research'. Oakley maintains that quantitative research provides the weight of evidence that is needed to carry the wider social dimension of the data:

Women and other minority groups above all, need quantitative research, because without that it is difficult to distinguish between personal experience and collective oppression. Only large scale comparative data can determine to what extent the situation of men and women are structurally differentiated (Oakley, 1999: 251).

The implication of Oakley's position is clear. She perceives quantitative data as the route to conveying social trends and she embraces more qualitative approaches to dig deep into those social trends. That is, instead of paradigm wars, she has cleared the warzone with a more tolerant and expansive sets of approaches. Fitzsimons has also disrupted this dichotomy in her methodological decisions, using large data, which she gathered herself, and deep interviews to present a much more multi-faceted picture than either quantitative or qualitative on their own (2015). Similarly with Lynch, in her many publications over the years, but in particular, Lynch et al, shows that critical research can be derived from big numbers, depending on the standpoint of the researchers (2012). And there are reservoirs to draw on for students and beginning researchers. For example, Hurley uses quantitative data to support his argument that inequality is wider now than in the past (2014). We can cleverly use the Master's Tools to attack the Master's house (Lorde, 1984, 2013).

Conclusion

If we are committed to equality and justice, the research we undertake has to reflect this. The nexus of knowledge, practice and research is the site of critical adult and community education, as it emerges more as a discipline in its own right. I have argued in this article that 'really useful research' has to embrace the learning from the 'really useful knowledge' and 'really useful practice' in order to take its place in this work. This means that it has to encompass quantitative research in addition to qualitative; it has to question new trends, such as 'evidence-based' research; it has to include a gender dimension if it is to create authentic application to social science; and, finally, it must interrogate each approach in terms of ethical positioning and emancipatory potential. That is, we make the road to 'really useful research' by walking, building on the radical foundations laid by Horton and Freire, (1990) and hooks (2003) focused on social and analyses of power, geared towards consciousness raising as a prelude to changing policy and practice.

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