

In pursuit of an authentic educational relationship: An examination of dialogue in Freirean adult literacy practice

ALEX MCKILLICAN

Abstract

This paper engages in a critical analysis of the educational theory of Paulo Freire. It is based on qualitative research which explores Irish adult literacy practice. The research harnesses the ontological aspects of Freire's theory; his interpretation of how human reality is constructed. Using this as the theoretical foundation for inquiry, research questions were developed using the theme of Freire's dialogical 'rejection of subject/object dichotomies' (Freire 1970). This element of Freire's theory is deconstructed and is used in order to examine how an authentic educational relationship, between learner and tutor/educator, can be created through dialogue. These considerations have pedagogical applications in all areas of the adult and further education sectors.

Keywords: Freirean critical pedagogy, adult literacy, critical education, ontology

Introduction

I don't want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow educators not to import me. Ask them to re-create and re-write my ideas (Freire, 2005).

In Ireland in recent years much research on adult literacy development has, very importantly, focussed on various types of human development (Feely, 2010; Howard and Logan, 2012; Connolly and Hussey, 2013). These socio-economic, functional, and political considerations are very valuable to the adult learner. However, this paper argues that the practice of adult literacy education has another variant of [human] development which contributes profoundly to the inner life of the adult learner; the *ontological* capital. This is a somewhat

neglected aspect in adult literacy research in Ireland. As such, this paper will examine the more essential and primordial aspects of literacy development in adulthood. One way to accomplish this is to focus on how an authentic educational relationship between adult literacy learner and adult literacy tutor/educator can bring both individuals to a closer understanding of *being*. This examination of this particular aspect of the practice of adult literacy education can be applied to all areas of adult education where there exists an educational relationship between the learner and tutor/educator. This paper aims to give a voice to radical adult literacy tutors and educators – from volunteer tutors to managers of adult literacy programmes – who view adult literacy education and provision not just in socio-economic/functional or political terms, but in metaphysical and ontological terms also.

Research context

This particular area of research was inspired by my engagement, initially as a volunteer tutor, on various adult literacy programmes with the City of Limerick VEC, and, subsequently, with Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board as a contracted tutor. The data collection for the research was carried out in a number of regional VEC's. The subjects of this research were professionals who are engaged in the provision of adult literacy education – the sample was made up from both tutors and managers of adult literacy programmes. As previously mentioned, the theoretical framework for this research is based on the educational praxis of Paulo Freire. By virtue, then, of the ontological elements of that theory – i.e. how he located adult literacy development within human existence/being (Dale, 2003; McLaren, 2005; Roberts, 2002) – I have used the theory to explain and to justify my research on examining authentic dialogue in the adult literacy educational relationship. As with critical educational research of this kind, the analysis of the data here contains a reflexive element (Etherington, 2004). I have used autoethnography to accomplish this (Ellingson and Ellis, 2008). Nascent from postmodern philosophy – where the focus on scientific empiricism is debated – autoethnography provided me with a method of legitimising personal knowledge and history as it relates to my journey, thus far, as an adult educator. This was done in order to promote critical interpretation.

Literature Review: The ontology of Paulo Freire

Before assessing Freire's thoughts on authentic dialogue in the educational relationship, it is necessary to understand how he understood human reality. Freire (1970) understood the human individual as both *thinking* and *being*. His

ontological understanding – his interpretation of existence, reality and being in the human condition – is, therefore, dualistic (Roberts, 2002). Freire was concerned with examining the relationship between thinking (idealism) and being (materialism); thinking is related to consciousness and this leads to idealism, while being relates to matter and practice, and this leads to materialism (McLaren and Leonard, 1993). Idealism may be separated into subjective idealism and objective idealism. At this point Freire's ontology becomes related to the political and social world of the adult literacy learner: "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage their war of liberation, they must perceive the reality of the oppression not as a closed world, from which there is no exit, but as a limiting-situation which they can transform" (Freire 1970, p. 27). When developing his theory - Freire's justification on how human beings come to *know* the world through the senses - he did so by interpreting the world as an objective reality - a reality which is entirely independent of the existent (the subject), but, which is a world that is capable of being known (Freire, 1970, p. 72). This is key, as it is dialogue, through language, to which Freire's educational epistemology is anchored (Freire, 2005, pp. 72-74). For Freire (1970, 1972, 1974, 1996), education was a means to liberate. He asserted that liberation should come about through a uniquely human dialectical process (via dialogue); this he termed a dialogical 'rejection of subject/object dichotomies' (Freire, 1970). Freire postulated, however, that it is the opposite which is actually happening in the educational process, contending that information is not passed on but is deposited; this is his famous 'banking' concept of education (Freire, 1970).

Authentic dialogue in Freirean educational theory

Before directly examining authentic dialogue in Freirean educational theory it is necessary to clearly define what is meant by authentic as it is used in the phrase authentic dialogue. This can be accomplished by considering Freire's theory of conscientization. The basis of Freire's theory of conscientization is dialogue; "Dialogue is an encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world - dialogue is an existential necessity" (Freire, 1970, p. 69). Freire maintains that conscientization is underscored by an authentic dialogue between educator and learner. According to Freire (1974) authentic dialogue arises when human beings emerge out of their submersion and gain the faculty to intervene in reality. This happens due to *conscientizacao* (Freire 1970). *Conscientizacao*, usually referred to as 'conscientization', is the strengthening of the attitudes and awareness of all emergences:

One of the cardinal principles in Freire's philosophy is that of a man's vocation to be more – more, that is, than what he is at any given time or place. There are thus no developed men [sic] except in a biological sense. The essence of the human is to be in a continual non-natural process. In other words, the characteristic of the human species is its repeatedly demonstrated capacity for transcending what is merely given, what is purely determined (Veiga, 1993, p. 9).

In the same way that a person's ontological and historical vocation may be hampered by particular socially manufactured constructs – that one's understanding is; “therefore, on one level, conscientization, or the process of becoming aware, provides a space in which one's perception of reality may change” (Blackburn, 2000, p. 17). Conscientization is more than a mechanically driven intellectual process – it is the essence of a dialectical process which manifests action. Conscientization leads to reflection, which leads to action, which brings us to liberation (Freire, 1970). In the same way that existential philosophy calls for an individual to rigorously assess their own lives in an attempt to come to an authentic awakening, the Freirean theory of conscientization asks the individual to become aware of social, political and economic contradictions which are present in society (Freire, 1970; 1974). In order for an authentic dialogue to happen it is necessary, therefore, for the educator to go through this same process.

As we have already discovered Freire (1970) believed that through dialogue a process of examination of the relationship between subject and object (between learner and tutor/educator) could be examined (McLaren and Leonard, 1993). He was of the opinion that the material world and consciousness are united – no dichotomy (or separation into two distinct halves) exists between the two. This is an example of the influence of existential ontology on his educational philosophy. Freire (1996) insisted that there exists a concord between method and structure, objectivity and subjectivity, ideas and being, and between the dynamic relationship between theory and praxis: “I refer to the relationship between subject and object, consciousness and reality, thought and being, theory and practice. Any attempt to treat the relationship based upon the duality of subject and object [thereby dehumanising the educational relationship, thus negating its dialectal unity] will not explain this relationship in a satisfactory manner” (Freire, pp. 13-14, cited in Torres, 1994). This is an important consideration for the radical adult literacy tutor/educator. Freire (1970, 1972, 1974, 2005) was of the opinion that educational experiences should

be co-intentional. He thought that *co-intentional* experience, as a way to critical consciousness, is the foundation to a critical pedagogy. He states that the teacher and student who are 'co-intent on reality, are both subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and there by coming to know it critically, but in the task of recreating that knowledge; as they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators' (Freire, 1970, p. 51). Freire's concept of co-intentional education illuminates the union which exists between subjects who come together, by way of dialogue, to give name to their world: the authentic educational relationship between the adult literacy learner and the adult literacy tutor/educator.

Methodology: A qualitative method of inquiry

The data collection and analysis for this study followed an interpretive critical research paradigm; a paradigm which rejected scientific relativism and is anti-positivist in essence (Schwandt, 2001). The research design was informed by an anti-positivist paradigm because, I believe, the social world should not be subject to the same methods of investigation as the natural world. I therefore rejected empiricism and the scientific method. Rather, I focused on the interpretations that social actions have for the people who were studied for this research (Habermas, 1989). To accomplish this, I applied an interpretive paradigm to understanding the data from the in-depth interviews with the adult literacy educators (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Considering the resulting data in this way allowed for the recognition of the intersubjective validity of the different claims of the research participants (Habermas, 1989) the voice of the individual adult literacy educators. The method of data collection used to record the data was accomplished by using the semi-structured in-depth interview (Bell, 2005). I used Constant Comparison Method (Miles and Huberman, 1994), and Network Analysis (Bliss, Monk and Ogborn, 1983) in order to manage and deconstruct the data before applying discourse analysis in my attempt to develop any theory. As a qualitative researcher, I was conscious of the fact that the information given to me by the respondents is highly influenced by their immersion in the culture of adult literacy practice. As such, attitudes and convictions that the said educators had could not be alienated from their environment and experience. It was due to this construction of reality that I chose to use the semi-structured qualitative interview, as this type of data collection was more compatible to the overall qualitative paradigm of the research framework used in the research (Geary and Mannix McNamara, 2007). I considered the responses from the adult literacy professionals as being 'texts'; 'texts' which were then subject to discourse analysis. I was interested in

the ‘content of the talk’, rather than being interested in semiology – which is the theory investigating the relationship between knowledge and signs. These ‘texts’ were taken literally and not as the sign or signifier of some symbolic activity (Schwandt, 2001). I also included an element of reflexivity in the design of the research paradigm used in the study. Reflexivity was an integral element in the qualitative research process as it promoted the understanding that the researcher is inextricably linked to the social world in which he/she researches (Symon and Cassell, 2012). I can extend this understanding by viewing the social world as a world that is already ‘interpreted’ by the people who inhabit it; an understanding of the world to which this research adheres (Ricoeur, 1992). This idea serves as a double hermeneutic, or, double interpretation, and was important for this research (Habermas, 1989). As researcher I am in-the-world and of-the-world – this helped me to construct an analysis of the research experience which could be understood as: “a reflexive means, by which the researcher/practitioner embeds himself or herself amidst theory and practice, and by way of intimate autobiographic account, explicates a phenomenon under investigation” (McIlveen, 2008, p. 1). This type of reflexive writing served as a dialogue which was existential in nature and which has been informed by my activities as a researcher and adult literacy educator. In support of this, McCormack suggests that the researcher adopt “a paradigm of research that does not pretend scientific validity, [but] one that recognises [that] the researcher’s own assumptions, experiences and subjectivity constitute the major source of colour in the canvas he or she is painting” (2007, p. 96). This kind of sensitivity in the theoretical framework of the research ties in neatly with the central argument which this paper makes: that is, that the best kind of adult literacy practice is something which is anti-dualistic in nature. This Freirean unified and anti-dualistic understanding of mind allowed me to ask the adult literacy educators questions in relation to their educational relationship with adult learners. The wording of these two questions was an attempt to represent Freire’s attitude to the ideal learner/educator educational relationship. Examples of open-ended type questions which appeared on the semi-structured interview schedules were (Bell, 2005): ‘How do you view your educational relationship with the adult learner?’ and ‘Do you think the learner can educate the tutor?’

Examination of the findings

Examples of responses from the adult literacy educators to these questions were as follows:

(Tutor) I view my relationship with learners as being connected to my own life. What we're doing with adults is more than teaching. It's a kind of a journey with the learner.

(Tutor) I think that it's OK to show a little bit of vulnerability. In other words that it is OK to show that you [as the tutor/educator] don't know everything. I think that if you can put a student-centred approach to both the practical side, the delivery of lessons and the development of materials, along with the subtle dynamics which are ever present in the class room – that is valuable.

(Tutor) Let me tell you that adult education, as in the immediate tutoring of adults, can be very taxing. Adults can drain you emotionally but that's part of it. You hear a lot of things, but you need to respect that. Sometimes I think I'm some kind of therapist. I respect my learners deeply as I was one of them.

(Programme Manager) I don't actually tutor anymore but I'm still very much aware of what learners we have coming into our centre. I miss tutoring actually. I have gotten incredible value from my time in adult basic education. So, nowadays even though I am in the background I still try to place myself in the shoes of my learners when it comes to making any decisions re. programmes, materials or any other decisions that will directly affect their learning experience here in this centre.

(Programme Manager) Yes, of course I am a programme manager now and in many ways it's a more challenging job – but, it is restrictive at the same time. I do miss my time as a tutor...I have to say that. As a manager there is a constant state of conflict and you learn how to adjust to that. I do miss the close tutoring relationship I have had with learners. They are still in my mind.

(Programme Manager) Oh yes, of course! You are always on the lookout for how your learner learns. Any tips and tricks that you can pick up from something you have done will be part of your learning as well. Students can come up with wonderful examples of "oh yeah, I learnt it through this" or "I did it like that". But the relationship also affects your life outside the service - you see things in more down to earth terms. Little things are much more fulfilling. So, yes the learner educates the tutor in many ways really.

As these comments highlight both personal and professional identity were key themes which emerged for the participants. Valuable information and

insights may be taken from this data as it demonstrates that the attitude of adult literacy educators towards their educational relationship with their learners is a complex one. I believe this highly qualitative data can have a profound impact on contemporary Irish, and, indeed, international adult literacy practice. Each tutor and programme manager interviewed emphasised the importance of a good educational relationship with their learners and they included, constantly, the learner's perspective when expressing how they view the educational relationship. In particular, it is interesting to note that one tutor considers her relationship with her learners as a "kind of a journey with [the] learner". This type of emphasis on the educational relationship can be expressed in existential terms; this journeying [with-the-learner] is a kind of *being-in-the-world-together*. It is an understanding which can be interpreted as [an] anti-dualist realisation in which, we, as human beings, journey through the world *together* – not just materially but idealistically also. As examined above, at the heart of Freire's educational theory is his anti-dualistic theory of mind (Freire, 1970). It is through our relationships with each other that we make sense of the world in which we share: "We are, therefore, the only beings capable of being both the objects and subjects of the relationships that we weave with others and with the history that we make, and that makes and remakes us. Between us and the world, relationships can be critically, naively, or magically perceived, but we are aware of these relationships to an extent that does not exist between any other being and the world" (Freire, 2005, p. 136). I believe that the respondents interviewed for this research are both unconsciously and consciously aware of this phenomenon of which Freire speaks. Through [a] *dialectic* the learning experience of the adult literacy learner is brought to its maximum potential. Thus, moving in the world *with* one another becomes praxis in the world. Developing a pedagogy which is influenced by what can now be termed *Freirean Existentialism*, allows the adult literacy tutor/educator to experience a kind of locus of being with learners in the educational relationship. This locus, I believe, comes from the relationship which inevitably builds due to the intimacy of the learning experience. As adult educators we must see adult learners, whose education we participate in, as being our equals in every way. Again Freire advises: "We [educators] must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not anti-scientific. We must dare in order to say scientifically, and not as mere blah-blah-blah, that we study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body; we do all these things with feeling, with emotions, with wishes, with fear, with doubts, with passion, and also with critical reasoning" (Freire, 2005, p. 4). I will now

include a brief autoethnographical discussion on how my perspective of the educational relationship between adult learner and adult tutor/educator has evolved, both by my continued involvement in adult literacy provision and by the conducting of research into this area.

Authentic dialogue and praxis

A key aspect in critical educational research such as this is the inclusion of an autoethnographical element (Etherington, 2004). This is valuable for me especially because of my return to education as an adult. This autoethnographical consideration allows me to mould my own norms in the social and cultural structure of adult education. This, I believe, impacts on my own capacity as an agent (as tutor/educator and researcher) in that particular social world (Archer, 2007). This takes the form of a reflexive dialogue which is written in a highly personalised style. In order for me to highlight this process I have drawn upon certain writers and literature that impact on both my personal and professional world. I believe my educational relationship with adult learners has a symbiotic quality to it. This informs – apart from any formal training or teaching experience – the *key* element in the composition of my pedagogical make up as a tutor/educator and researcher in adult education. This, I believe, helps me to bond with and communicate with adult learners in a very natural way. And here, in this social phenomenon, there exists [an] *a priori* shared knowledge between me and the adult learner/learners. This particular kind of educational relationship has as its foundations a natural ‘rejection of subject/object dichotomies’ (Freire, 1970). The essence of Freire’s ‘rejection of subject/object dichotomies’, we should remind ourselves, is that through dialogue, barriers and differences created by how power is shared in human relationships can be broken down (Freire, 1970). Quite quickly in my educational relationships with adult learners I will (not always, but usually) inform them of my return, as an adult, to education. Quite often, at that moment, a pedagogical state of grace enters the room. What we do as educators I believe is to attempt to communicate with others. It is perhaps our wish to re-create ourselves in the pursuit of – as Freire (1970) says – humanisation. However, we must be careful that the educational relationship we help to construct with adult learners does not become didactic; it is a co-communicative relationship where a social world is created in tandem with the learner. The critical or radical educator does not have to be overtly political. Being a radical educator begins in the space which is created by the educational relationship. Radical educators should craft the ontological aspect of their pedagogy. This will, I believe, result in the promotion of a *being-with* the adult learner, not, we may say, a *being-alongside*.

If radical educators immerse themselves in the ontological considerations of Freire's educational theory this will, I believe, provide for them an organic and existentially pure line of communication with adult learners.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The appreciation and understanding of the complex relationship which exists between the adult literacy tutor/educator and adult literacy learner can be a vehicle for a radical type of education. Through authentic dialogue the adult learner and tutor/educator can influence content and methodology; as a result praxis will emerge – a *co-intentionality* in the shared learning process. This will deepen the discourse on adult literacy education in Ireland at the present. According to Grummell (2007), developments in educational policy-making in the area of adult education and adult basic education are shaped by neo-liberal discourses that adapt adult education principles, such as life-long learning and emancipation, for its own economic and political logic. This is important. Nevertheless, what I am proposing is to develop an awareness of adult literacy development which is far more 'sensitive' to and 'open' to the metaphysical (not necessarily spiritual, but, certainly, ontological) effects of adult literacy education; or, as Fleming (2004) says, a kind of adult education that speaks to people's "highest aspirations". Fleming (2004) advises against seeing adults 'merely' as workers. I agree with this position and I think it is correct for the discourse on adult education in Ireland to continue to link development in that sector with equal opportunities and social inclusion. However, as this research demonstrates, the discourse on adult literacy education (and adult education, in general) could benefit from the inclusion of an ontologically informed layer of data. This 'layer' could be developed to include the dynamic which this research has highlighted; that is, the inclusion of the ontological experience, experienced by the adult learner and the adult literacy professional in the educational process itself. This will, I believe, further promote the democratising effects of the adult education process and will heighten both the public and private lives of the adult learner and the adult educator.

Recommendations for policy

Adult literacy policy development must not fall into a pedagogical malaise whereby we solely acknowledge the economic benefits of adult education. Research should promote the communicative, humanising, and transformative aspects of this area of education: Initial adult literacy tutor training programmes should include a focus on becoming/being a reflexive educator. Distinct policies need to be embraced within the newly developed Education and Training Boards

(ETBs) which highlight the need for continuing professional development and in-service training for all adult literacy educators. The focus of the training should be on the notion of reflexive practice in the pedagogy of the adult literacy professional. Adult education policy makers should be increasingly sensitive to the critical and emancipatory theories of adult education espoused by Paulo Freire. This would continue to promote the socio-economic and functional aspects of adult literacy development while highlighting and encouraging the ‘consciousness raising’ (ontological) aspects of adult literacy education.

Recommendations for Practice

The educational relationship between the adult literacy professional and the adult literacy learner *must* be thought of having a mentoring aspect to it. This should be reflected in the discourse on Irish adult literacy education and in programmes of initial tutor training. The more reflexive and open adult literacy educators are to learner influence in relation to the development of materials and curricula, the more learners can shape their own literacy destiny. Along with the learner’s motivation to learn, the learning context should also shape engagement; how the educational environment, which is created by both the learner and the tutor, can influence the ways in which the learner learns. For practical reasons, the adult educator controls the educational context to a greater extent. However, if the educator understands how the educational context influences engagement, he/she can then influence engagement in a more positive way. Engagement with Freirean theory – as critical educational theory – can help the educator to do this. Adult literacy educators (if not already doing so) should embrace the understanding reflexive praxis – how a philosophical examination of one’s attitudes, beliefs and biases can contribute to the understanding of how one forms an educational relationship with adult learners. This will have positive theoretical and methodological repercussions for their practice in adult education; a willingness to embrace the constantly changing narrative of one’s identity may contribute to one’s interior life also. Existentialism, as a research paradigm, should have more of an impact on critical educational research and practice. By embracing this unique body of knowledge theorists and educators can reject educational dualism and relativism. This will have a profound effect on the educational relationship between learner and adult educator.

The one outstanding principle which this paper has attempted to highlight is the Freirean idea that *dialogue* in the adult educational relationship is the centre point of all human associations. This research interprets the world as

an objective reality; a reality which is entirely independent of the existent (the subject), but which is a world that is capable of being known (Freire, 1970, p. 72). As one half of this phenomenon, adult literacy educators bring their own biography to the process of *praxis* in adult literacy teaching and practice. The same, I contend, is true for the other half of this educational phenomenon – the adult literacy learners – of whose primary locus in adult literacy development is informed by their biographies also. As [an] educational praxis, all adult educators have a pedagogical duty to uphold this fact as educational reality.

Conclusion: The implications of this type of research for practice

In conclusion, it is necessary to briefly analyse what the implications of this type of research are for practice in the adult education sector. The closer we can come to a critical understanding of this data the more beneficial it will be for adult learners also. The data collected from the adult literacy educators for this research is rich in detail. In order to develop ‘theory’ from this data I developed the typology ‘factors identified by respondents’. The development of this category came from *emergent themes* which materialised from my application of Network Analysis (Bliss, Monk and Ogborn, 1983). The ‘factors identified by respondents’ proved fruitful as they highlighted how the respondents viewed their practice in adult literacy education.

The findings of this research were interpreted within the context in which they were uncovered. However, I believe this research type of research can allow other researchers to replicate and build upon what was undertaken here. The theoretical framework behind this research is solid, in that it follows the traditional structure of describing my hypothesis and the purpose of the research. As a teacher and researcher in adult education, I believe I have seen how literacy development in the adult can help them come to a closer understanding of their *being*. The findings of this research support the fact that my fellow adult educators think the same way. This understanding of adult literacy development is the type of understanding which I wish to promote, in the current discourse on adult literacy education in Ireland. In doing so, it will complement the ‘voice’ of the adult learner. According to Grummell (2007), developments in educational policy-making in the area of adult education and adult basic education are shaped by neo-liberal discourses that adapt adult education principles, such as life-long learning and emancipation, for its own economic and political logic. I agree with this view. Nevertheless, what I am proposing is to develop an awareness of adult literacy development which is far more ‘sensitive’ to and ‘open’ to the metaphysical (not necessarily spiritual, but

certainly ontological) effects of adult literacy education; or as Fleming (2004) says, a kind of adult education that speaks to peoples “highest aspirations”. Fleming (2004) advises against seeing adults ‘merely’ as workers. I agree with this position and I think it is correct for the discourse on adult education in Ireland to continue to link development in that sector with equal opportunities and social inclusion. However, I believe the discourse on adult education could benefit from the inclusion of yet another ‘layer of data’/‘ontological position’. This other ‘layer’ might be something which could be developed to include the dynamic which this research has highlighted; that is, the inclusion of the ontological experience, experienced by the adult learner and the adult literacy professional in the educational process itself. This will further promote the democratising effects of the adult education process and will, I maintain, heighten both the public and private lives of the adult learner and the adult educator. In a methodological sense this is particularly relevant for one to one tutoring, but will also work in a small group situation – particularly when the group shares the same interests, similar biographies or experiences. When one examines the sample interviews above, it is not, I consider, without foundation to begin to see how an educational perspective – which is supported by an existentially informed pedagogy – could not be applied as a methodological approach to adult literacy development and teaching. This means that the subjective nature of adult literacy development, found in the educational process itself, could be utilised to generate themes which in turn would allow the adult literacy professional and learner to co-develop materials. This would also influence future research paradigms.

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