

Existentialist Theory in the Pedagogy of Paulo Freire: Its Implications for Adult Education Policy and Practice in Ireland

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Abstract

This paper examines and critiques existentialist interpretations of being within Paulo Freire's educational theory. The principle supposition of the paper is that through engaging in adult education, the adult learner can heighten their understanding of their lives, metaphysically. The paper also posits that adult education can develop the will; this notion is vitally important as it is by the will which the individual human being loves and according to that love, decides. This has major implications for the adult learner socially, politically, and spiritually.

Keywords: Paulo Freire, ontology, metaphysics, existentialist, adult education, adult literacy

Introduction

This paper analyses existentialist theory in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. In Freire's work a relationship exists between materialist dialectics, epistemology, and metaphysics. Freire used a Marxist analysis of contrasting social relations in his writings. He also embraced Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical conclusions, one of which upholds the idea in absolute human freedom. Therefore, Sartre's work is prominently featured in the paper. Sartre's philosophy of being and existence cannot only be understood through a rational lens. It must be understood by way of the lived experience. Freire's philosophy of education incorporates both concepts. That is the primary philosophical position of this paper. The lived experience is very interesting for our discussion as we will take some anecdotal examples from work which has been done with adult literacy learners. This will help to explore certain philosophical suppositions as we encounter them and, in the process, make links between the three main bodies of thought under discussion: existentialism, Freire's pedagogy, and adult literacy education and

adult education. The penultimate subsection of this paper – *Freire's Theory of Conscientization: An Existential Philosophy?* – is a more detailed attempt to draw out and re-invent (as Freire urges us to) the existentialist elements in his educational theory as they relate to the lived experience, educationally speaking. We will see how the existentialist elements in that process form the necessary, ontological conditions, for conscientization (Freire's social theory of consciousness raising) to occur. Once that metaphysical process has occurred praxis, or, the 'reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed', can happen (Freire, 1970). However, the discussion on praxis, and how it is relevant for adult learners and adult educators, will not be exhaustive. For the moment we are content with examining the moment of becoming as prescribed by existentialist ontology and adopted by Freire in order to form his notion of being.

The paper is arranged by examining some of the main tenets in the body of thought known as existentialism. As we consider this theory we will take note of how Freire's concept of being has been shaped by it. We will also highlight how his pedagogy has been moulded by that thought and this will be the ground for any assertions and suppositions made along the way. The conclusion will present some recommendations for adult education policy and practice in Ireland.

Existentialist Philosophy: A Preliminary Sketch

A foundational precept in existentialist thought is that an individual's existence precedes [his/her] essence. This may indicate that someone can simply make of themselves what they will without being influenced or persuaded by any structural and social dimensions. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that human beings are born into an often-hostile world where social structures have a huge influence in how they live their lives. It is important to acknowledge that the individual is born into a complex world with complex social structures, thousands of years in the making. These social structures have come about through the force of traditions, values, conflicts, and social actions. It is in such an environment which the individual begins to discover themselves and finds meaning by free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The central notion in existentialist thought is that people are looking to reveal who and what they are as they navigate through their lives, in the process making choices founded on their experiences, beliefs, and perspectives (Barrett, 1990).

The proponents of the philosophy of existentialism have developed two main sub-divisions of this thought with both theistic and atheistic forms (Kaufman, 1991). Personal choice becomes unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth in the atheistic form, whereas personal choice is made against the background of an objective truth in the theistic form. (The distinctions between each, and how they impact our inquiry, will be touched on later). However, an existentialist could also be an agnostic relativist. Although not central to this discussion, it is interesting to note that Freire's politics (and as a result his pedagogy) were influenced by a faith rooted in Catholicism (Kirylo and Boyd 2017). However, Freire urged the church not just to embrace personal piety, but to take prophetic action. Freire's spirituality was founded in the belief that God commands all people of goodwill to endeavour to create a vision of a new humanity given by God.

The philosophy of existentialism proposes that human life is a process which is not fully satisfying because of the adversity and personal pain which comes about because of the absence of fulfilment, power, and control a person has over his/her life. The philosophy of existentialism is an avenue by which an individual can search for true self and true personal fulfilment in life. Most fundamentally, it is the capricious act that existentialism deems the most abhorrent – that is, when an individual or society attempts to appoint or insist that their beliefs, values, or rules be wholeheartedly acknowledged and obeyed. Existentialists consider this to be very damaging for a person. The result is that the person becomes whatever those in power desire. Thus they are dehumanised and reduced to being an object. Existentialism posits that a person must decide what is to be believed about their relationship to the world/society in which they find themselves in, as opposed to any arbitrary religious or secular world values.

Being

The inquiry into the enigma of what it is to be human can be summed up as Socrates when he advised 'know thyself'. Although succinctly put by Socrates, therein lies the problem. De Montaigne (2009, p. 67), has this to say on the nature of the problem of understanding what it means to be: 'if my mind could gain a foot hold, I would not write essays, I would make decisions; but it is always on apprenticeship and on trial'. The contradictory and illusive nature of a person's being is nicely summed up by Pascal when he tells us that: 'we burn with the desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereupon to build a tower reaching to the infinite, but our ground cracks and the earth opens up to abyss' (Paschal, 1970, p. 71). The human quest and desire

to come to a greater or ultimate self-understanding, is for existentialist writers, a mistake; the essence of existentialist thought is that we must understand 'man in his particularity' (Cooper, 2008). Wilhelm Dilthey (2004, p. 54), posited that to understand *being* one must pay attention to other individuals by the 'reliving and reproducing of experience - *their* experience; by feeling together with others and being sympathetic to their emotions; understanding being is the project of unification between the knowing object and the object known'.

The effects of the Second World War on people and on society have had a major influence on existential thought (Barrett, 1990). At that time Europe underwent a devastating period in which it experienced economic and spiritual destruction (Davies, 1996). As a result, Western thought which had evolved to the promise of an 'infallible contract based on abstract powers such as Mind, the Absolute or Reason' now seemed illogical (Cox, 2008, p. 17). In his treatise *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre highlighted the flexibility of existential thought by interpreting the world and human reality as insecure. He attributed this to the idea of the human being as being 'thrown into the world' - the individual in his/her world is now left to fend for himself/herself against a determinism which may scupper his/her projects (Sartre, 1947). Additionally, Kierkegaard (1998, p. 38) chose to understand existence in terms of possibility by telling us that 'despair, which controls existence, is the sentiment of the possible'. This is an interesting idea for adult educators because we encounter people at very sensitive and, we might say, metaphysically, challenging times in their lives. For Sartre, the possibilities of existential choice are endless. However, they are relative. All existentialist thinkers consider existence as something which pushes forward with risk, negation and limitation (Cooper, 2008). In the existential interpretation of being included in these risks is the individual's descent into inauthenticity and alienation, his/her deposition from a person to a thing (Heidegger, 2008; Sartre, 1947). Counterbalancing this are the theological forms of existentialism. In the theological forms of existentialism, people are 'provided' with an escape (Kierkegaard, 1998; Tillich, 2000). The outlet for escape, which, is solidified by faith, is provided by the promise of extrinsic aid from God (Westphal, 1998). Conversely, Sartre maintains that the 'other is the hidden death of my possibilities' (Sartre, 2008). (This Sartrean idea is the antithesis of a theistic existential interpretation of being; certainly it is antithesis to the Christian idea of faith in the person of Jesus Christ as the God man). Buber (2002) on the other hand believes that coexistence is not anonymous. He sees co-existence as being founded on inter-communication between individuals. It is this relationship which shapes the

human being's authentic experience. This aspect of existential thought has profound implications for both the adult learner and the adult educator due to the inter-communication spoken of above. In his educational theory, Freire asks for attention to the inter-communication between people, in the dialogue which exists between the educator and learner (Freire, 1970; 1972; 1974; 2005). This suggests that a foundational aim of adult education should be to create a dialogue with adult learners. Dialogue is just one example, but it is this type of connection that exists between existential thought and Freire's pedagogy.

Sartre (1947) was of the opinion that we as individuals can transform human life into the possible; everything which is true and which has a human action, he posits, equates to the subjective environment of a human being. He proposes that many theories concerning the nature of human kind are inherently ostentatious. He holds that many theories ignore what is of most importance: the uniqueness of a human being. He does this while contending that an existentialist view permits a redefinition of the human condition. For this to occur, it is necessary for the individual to pay attention to certain experiences which have shaped their attitude to their world and their view of it. An individual's very existence is moulded, influenced, and directly informed by prior experiences, and unless an individual is aware of this they will continue to base their decision making on experiences invented and given value to by others (Sartre, 1947). This idea has a resonance for the practice of adult education. As adult educators, we know that many learners who return to education suffer from the very thing that Sartre warns against. Prior experiences, in every area of their life, can handicap the learner's attitude towards their place in the educational experience. Indeed, prior experiences can sometimes objectify the learner in the educational experience. Many adult learners can be reminded of this to begin to guide them on a path of critical self-understanding. However, this is something which must be treated with sensitivity and must have some strategic value in terms of learning.

Realising that decisions are moulded by previous experience highlights for an individual the 'possibility of choice' (Sartre, 1947). Sartre sees this process as stepping out from the 'herd' as being gradual. For Sartre the individual is now equipped with a completely new and subjective world view. Sartre (1947, p. 45), says, this new world view, this 'revolutionary way of living', is pockmarked with difficult choices where decisions must be made. However, this new way of existing, he maintains, proves to be difficult since most people's view of themselves comes from attitudes created by other people. Their entire notion

of themselves is based primarily upon past experiences which have been manufactured by others who wish to keep a position of power (Sartre, 1947). Certainly, thinking critically requires more than just an individual's perspective on their humanness – 'when we say every man chooses himself, we do mean that every man must choose himself, but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men' (Sartre, 1947, p. 49).

If we apply, as is appropriate here, an ontological appraisal, we can view Buber's I-Thou construction of the human relationship as being one in which a *being-for-itself* begins to impact on, or inhabits, the world of another *being-for-itself*. According to Levinas (1991) before a relationship is developed, I exist in my own world and the other is a stranger, someone over whom I have no power (Levinas, 1991, p. 39). Sartre (2008) also acknowledges this initial forming of relationships when he says that it is through the body that we first constitute the meaning and limits of our relationships with others:

Not that the body is the cause or the instrument of my relations with the other. However, the body constitutes their [the relationships] meaning and marks their limits. It is as body-in-situation that I apprehend the other's transcendence-transcended, and it is as body-in-situation that I experience myself in alienation for other's benefit. (Sartre, 2008, p. 383)

This is a highly technical description of human contact and communication. According to Sartre (2008) transcendence is the essential characteristic or activity of *being-for-itself*. The for-itself, in this context the educator and adult learner, are not in the world as objects are but as a transcendence or transcended subjects. In our attempt to understand and appreciate more fully our educational relationships with adult learners, we must believe that all educational relationships are deeply personal. In fact, they could be seen as sacred. The educational relationship adult learners may be viewed as a relationship that can transcend the world of objects - this includes our physical bodies - in order to be aware of the world and to act upon it. Understanding this dynamic is helpful for us because it helps to minimise the negative effects which issues of power may have on the educational relationship. By 'issues of power' we mean those which may arise because, for example, of administrative, teaching, or assessment procedures and differences or commonalities between the educator and the adult learner in terms of class, educational background, or any other social connections we may share with learners. We can postulate that an understanding of the adult learner as a *being-for-itself*, who is attempting to

navigate their way (by way of adult education) through a sometimes socially (and economically) hostile world, should be *a priori* in the pedagogy of the adult educator.

Freire (2005) informs us that the adult educator is in a position of great power in the educational relationship. This is a power which is complex, subtle, and potentially very influential on the development of the adult learner:

We [educators] deal daily with relationships, between things, between objects, between words in the composition of sentences and between these words themselves in the structure of the text. As soon as we begin to know that not only that we live but also that we know we live and that, therefore, we could know more, we who practice-in-the-world begin the process of learning about the practice itself. (Freire, 2005, p. 136)

It is important to acknowledge that these Freirean considerations of power in the educational relationship have a reflexive dynamic for our present discussion, and, therefore, on any hypothesis that is presented in this paper.

‘Existence Precedes Essence’

In his explanation of existence precedes essence Sartre tells us that:

[A person] first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in his world and defines himself afterwards. If man is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. (Sartre, 1947, p. 27)

The idea that our existence precedes our essence is both common to atheistic existentialist philosophers and Christian existentialist philosophers. Sartre (1947, p. 25) neatly summarises this commonality by saying: ‘what they have in common is simply the fact that they believe that existence comes before essence, or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective’. The Judeo-Christian concept of the human person acknowledges that people have been created by a loving god. However, the atheistic concept of the human person is that they simply exist – the human person was not created by some supernatural artisan. Sartre’s own meditations on this are very illuminative. He speaks of the craftsman who makes a paperknife. This paperknife has been made by the craftsman who had a conception of it. In other words, you cannot make something without knowing what it is for. In this case, the knife’s essence precedes its existence. What is its essence? It is the sum of the formulae and the

qualities which made its production and its definition possible. If we take this argument one step further we can see that believing in God is not acceptable for Sartre because God is a supernatural artisan. When God creates he knows exactly what he is creating. Therefore, the conception of man in the mind of God is comparable to that of a paperknife in the mind of the artisan. Sartre concludes that if God really exists the individual is not free anymore because someone has made you the way you are. The moral implications for this are such that now the created person is not responsible for his/her actions.

The idea that 'man makes himself', whereby the individual becomes something, is common ground – be it from an atheistic, relativistic or theistic aspect – in existentialist thought (Heidegger, 2008; Kierkegaard, 2004; Nietzsche, 1974; Sartre, 2004). Existential thought teaches us that people find themselves existing, and thus must form an essence for themselves, the individual must begin from the subjective (Meyers, 1989). Macquarrie (1973) suggests that human beings are unique on earth because the human being can be further defined. Crucially, man (to use Macquarrie's term) already *is*, man already *is* aware, and most importantly of all man is aware of who and what he may become: 'Man is a self-reflecting animal, in that he alone has the ability to objectify himself, to stand apart from himself, as it were, and to consider the kind of being he is, and what it is he wants to do and become' (Dobzhansky, cited in Macquarrie p. 70). This idea of a person as a self-reflecting animal charged with the choice of deciding who and what he/she becomes is central to our understanding of the adult learner. It is vitally important to attempt to deconstruct this phenomenon as a way to understand the educational journey of the adult learner from a perspective that is under-developed in the discussion of adult education.

Sartre (1947) says a human being has a kind of freedom which is radically exclusive to the individual. It is a freedom which is free from outside influences. However, not many individuals pursue the kind of freedom which Sartre maintains is in our reach. He suggests the very values which shape an individual's life are furnished through free choice. The existentialist perspective is that we invent our own nature. We are projected into existence at first having no pre-determined nature (Heidegger, 2008). It is only afterwards that we build our nature and essence through our deeds (Warnock, 1970). Adult educators would do well to keep this in mind as the educational process is profoundly meaningful for the adult learner, metaphysically speaking. This also presents a question for the adult educator: can this understanding of being be applied, pedagogically, to the adult learner? The answer to this is a resounding 'yes'.

Freedom

Proponents of existentialist theory place the idea of human freedom at the centre of their philosophical concerns (Sartre, 2004; Heidegger, 2008; Tillich, 2000; Kierkegaard, 2004; and Buber, 2002). They are concerned with the environment of men and women. They are interested in how the world shapes the behaviour of people. Here we can see a connection between existentialism and historical materialism. These two conceptions are reflected in Freire's work. Cooper (2008) suggests that the environment in which existentialists are concerned with is the world of human beings and there is a focus on men and women's place in the world. Warnock (1970) states that existentialists are concerned with how to gauge what freedom to choose entails for human beings; existentialists concentrate on meaning and aspiration, and see these conditions as those which make up human existence, as opposed to those which make up scientific and metaphysical truths.

Sartre (1947) informs us that there are absolutely no limits to the freedom which a person can acquire, neither transient nor godly, there is nothing that subjugates freedom. The individual is solely and entirely responsible for his/her own actions, notions, with circumstances being absolute. Sartre (2008) suggests that humans are essentially free. However, this freedom may not necessarily imbue pleasant feelings in the individual who now realises he or she is free. For Sartre this type of freedom carries with it a stern undertaking, which is further enhanced by the realisation that morality is nothing more than an invention. Thus, these 'agonies of choice and freedom' give new meaning to the respecting of others and to the respecting of the self (Sartre, 2008, p. 455). Sartre's doctrine of freedom is as revolutionary as it is radical, suggesting that men and women acquiesce unconditionally when taking responsibility for their own lives. Additionally, Sartre says there must be no faith in divine sponsorship; all pretexts are unacceptable whereby no divinities are the cause of man's state, no intrinsic impiousness, no genetically passed on traits or environment, no race, no class which one belongs to, no parent, no misleading education, and no childhood trauma - man is free (Sartre, 1947). Sartre's emphasis on personal choice in the face of freedom is radical (Flynn, 2006). The choice, and how that choice is shaped, is borne from an existential inner calling which we all experience.

Authenticity

The meaning of existence in existential thought is directly informed by the idea of authenticity (Cooper, 2008). In existential thought the kind of ownership

that an individual gives his or her life is the measure of either an authentic or inauthentic life. A person, after all, creates his/her own image (Sartre, 1947). In existential thought authentic existence comes about only through considered and rigorous honesty with oneself in the face of an objective world. Logically, inauthentic existence is born and shaped by outside forces, be they situational and circumstantial, precepts of values, political or ecclesiastical, or any external influence. Sartre has written: 'you are free, therefore choose - that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do. No signs are vouchsafed in this world' (Sartre, 1947, p. 34). Like other existentialists, Carl Jaspers sees authentic human existence as being constantly involved in 'situations' (Jaspers, 1971). Jasper's writings are influenced by many areas of the humanities including psychology, history, and literary theory. His theories form a synthesis of these influences. For Jaspers self-realisation only occurs through involvement with one's own self-made world (Jaspers, 1971). The goal for Jasper's philosophy was to aid the individual in achieving *Existenz*, a state where the individual is 'genuinely oneself and is making sense of one's life' (Mautner, 2000). Sometimes human beings discover themselves in situations which are unexpected. Jaspers calls these *Grenzsituationen* (Jaspers, 1971). This term has been translated as a 'limiting situation', a 'borderline situation', and an 'ultimate situation' (Mautner, 2000). According to Jaspers *Grenzsituationen* is something which cannot be dealt with rationally. A very specific example of *Grenzsituationen* is the inevitability of one's death. Jasper's says that we cannot deal with this process unless we become the *existenz* we potentially are, and we become ourselves by entering with open eyes into boundary situations (Jaspers, 1971). Mentioning Jasper's *Grenzsituationen* here allows us to re-enforce the position that an individual's ontological understanding of himself/herself can be heightened by learning or developing a new skill. Taking the opportunity to momentarily speak of my practice in adult literacy, I am reminded of the elderly adult learner who told me how he wanted to learn how to read and write before his death. Was the desire to develop this new skill an attempt by him to abseil more freely down the sheer face of [his] mortality? Somehow, I think so. This is also a reminder to me of the woman who shared with me that, because of her developing literacy skills, she could now 'see her future'. We thus content that developing literacy in adulthood has influence over, and can shape, burgeoning *Existenz* in the individual. It can also help to shape the evolution of someone's existence; I am here further reminded of the adult literacy learner who once shared with me that because of his improving literacy skills, he was 'now able to write his wife a birthday card for the first time in 32 years of marriage'.

Literacy, therefore, can be used as a powerful ontological tool that can help one bear witness to their own existence. The anxiety which is produced in some adults because of their poor literacy skills is, we can say with confidence, an existential one. Literacy is unique to [the] human being (Ong, 2002). As such, it is interesting that Paulo Freire (1970) calls literacy development an ‘ontological vocation’.

The authentic individual is one who had found themselves no longer able to ignore the existential anxiety which they felt in their lives. This process must have been driven by a profound willingness to change and become something new. Can an existentialist approach to living provide the individual with an opportunity of lasting secular or spiritual liberation? In his attempt to surmise the meaning of authenticity in existentialist thought Macquarrie says that ‘to exist as a self is to stand in the possibility of becoming at one with oneself, of fulfilling oneself or of being divided in oneself, separated from what everyone knows how to call [his] true self. In the language of existentialists, these two possibilities are to exist ‘authentically’ or ‘in-authentically’ (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 75). Additionally, Heidegger (2008) propounds that existing authentically may only be achieved through an individual reaching an understanding of themselves and this calls for a rigorous and honest approach in how and why they come to know themselves better. He suggests that one must realise that human reality is characterised by a uniqueness inherent to the individual and the process of life is full of possibility which may be fulfilled, and that life is underlined by concern, not the everyday concern of good citizenship but the kind of self-concern which leads to an authentic life. May we apply this understanding of being to the process of engaging in adult education? Surely, because engaging in adult education promotes *being-there*. We know, for example, that when we read poetry we are sometimes brought face to face with our primordial selves. It is no coincidence that Heidegger (1980) referred to language as the ‘house of being’. As such, literacy serves humans not just in a functional/everyday sense, but also serves to heighten the very sense of our being and has profound implications for adult education policy and practice.

As an advocate of a critical approach to the education, Freire’s pedagogy was of the inquiring kind and of the kind that came to realise individual strength could be forged from a subjective perspective and belief. A belief which was an existentially informed belief (Mayo 1995). In the following discussion *Freire’s Theory of Conscientization: An Existential Philosophy?* Freire’s individualistic approach to the teaching of adult learners will become evident. We will discover

how his belief in a critical approach to education is centred on empowering the individual. Through that process, the opportunity for a kind of educational awakening within the mind of the individual occurs (Freire 2005).

Freire's Theory of Conscientization: An Existential Philosophy?

Social analysis was an important part of how Freire set out his critical pedagogy. Acknowledging and encouraging the reflective aspect of the learning process, and how that can lead to action, was the basis of his theory. This process Freire referred to as praxis. However, this raising of the consciousness, cannot, we can postulate, occur until an individualised and internal transformation takes place. In considering whether Freire's theory of *conscientization* is an existentialist philosophy, we first must examine that aspect of his educational theory. We can then analyse conscientization in a more detailed way by applying an existentialist lens and it is much of Sartre's existential ontology can aid us in this task. In doing so, it is hoped that an original interpretation of 'conscientization' will emerge.

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). Through dialogue human beings emerge out of their submersion and gain the faculty to intervene in their reality. This happens due to *conscientização* (Freire 1970). Conscientização, 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 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 a person's ontological and historical vocation may be hampered by socially manufactured constructs. One's understanding is 'therefore, on one level, conscientization, or the process of becoming aware, which 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 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).

Generative Themes: A Methodology for Conscientization

Freire presents conscientization as a dialogical methodology whereby the discovery of themes unique to a group or individual may be 'harnessed to stimulate an individual's awareness of themselves' (Freire, 1970, p. 78). He views these generative themes as constituting *thought-language*, and as such referring to the existential reality of the individual. Freire (1970) considers the human being as an 'un-completed being' and treats his/her actions and self as an object of his/her reflection. In examining the human being in his/her existential reality, Freire draws our attention to the world of an animal. Freire talks of animals living submerged in a world in which they can give no meaning, and how they experience no tomorrow and will neither experience a today. An animal's life is ahistorical: 'the ahistorical life of an animal does not occur in the world. The world for the animal does not constitute a 'not-I' which could set it apart as an 'I' – animals cannot commit themselves' (Freire, 1970, p. 79). In opposition to animals' experiences, humans are aware of their activity in the world in which they exist and are also aware of how the world impinges on them. Freire stresses that when he uses the term exist, he is keen to highlight this term as emphasising the 'deeper involvement in the process of becoming' (Freire, 1970, p. 48). People infuse the world by way of their actions which they reflect on it. A person's world is structured historically, whereby a person's existence may be re-created (Freire, 1970). People are conscious beings. They exist in a dialectical relationship which is influenced by the determination of limits and their own freedom. The influence of historical materialism is evident here in Freire's theory. To overcome this tension, known as *limit-situations*, he insists that humans must place action upon 'concrete-historical reality' (Freire, 1970, p.81). Limit-situations are 'historically found' and as reality is transformed, situations are superseded.

Adapting an aspect of Marx's theory Freire compares the existence of an animal as opposite to the existence of a human being. Freire states 'an animal's product belongs immediately to its physical body, as opposed to man who freely confronts his own product' (Marx, cited in Freire, 1970, p. 81). Indeed, human

beings create culture and history through action. Through this hypothesis Freire's 'man' is a being of praxis. Moreover, praxis is the source of knowledge and creation for human beings (Freire, 1970).

How does Freire apply *generative themes* as a methodology in his educational theory? Generative themes are codifications of complex experiences in the life history and circumstances of the learner: 'in a literacy programme generative themes can be broken down into generative words, tri-syllabic words broken down into syllabic parts and used to generate other words' (Freire, 1970, p. 91). However, Freire points out that this scheme is most useful in languages which are phonetically based, for example, Spanish and Portuguese. Freire is concerned with what he calls a dominated consciousness, a consciousness which lacks a critical understanding of itself, and, due to its limit-situations cannot know reality. To truly know reality, there must be a new starting point, whereby the total vision of context in order to separate and isolate constituent elements exists, and where a clearer perspective of the whole can be experienced. This understanding of being has major implications for adult education policy and practice in Ireland.

Conclusion: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Our examination of existentialist ideas in the educational theory of Paulo Freire has been relatively straightforward. We have seen how Freire uses these ideas to form much of his ontology. However, the task of practically applying those ideas to adult educational theory is more challenging. It is challenging not least because we live and work in a time where scientific enquiry, and the resulting scientism which it produces, is dominant in educational and social research and practice. This has come about because of neo-liberalism's impact on economics (Connolly 2006). The impact this has on adult education in Ireland is that it promotes much theory which is dominated by technocratic concerns.

The overarching aim of the paper was to engage in a different way with Freirean theory; in attempting to do that we temporarily set aside the lens of post-modernism, at least from a cultural point of view. This paper has attempted to disclose the specificity of knowledge relating to adult education practice as espoused by Freire. The philosophical position of the paper is to uphold those elements of the theory which promote the subjective values of both adult learners and adult educators, and not any kind of meta-narrative. Our discussion above has also shown us that deconstructing (to a certain extent) the educational relationship between adult learner and adult educator is

worthwhile. Some may see this as an attempt to examine the social order in this area of education when in fact it should be something which, potentially at least, can go deeper still. The learner and the educator are two subjects who come together in a world of objects. The resulting I-thou relationship has the potential to bring the two persons to a state of being which could be described as antediluvian or primordial. This idea is a neglected idea in adult education theory, certainly in an Irish context.

We have also posited that the adult learner who engages in education does so not just for vocational reasons, but also for reasons which can only be examined in a metaphysical light. This yearning in the human person is not new. It can be traced back to Aristotle who said:

All men by nature reach out to know. Humans operate within a sphere of action that pertain to them alone: the sphere of deciding how to act in the case of things that could be otherwise, deciding by using language and deliberation, rather than acting from intrinsically guided forms of communication. (Aristotle in Lane, 2014, p. 56)

In reaching out to know all men and women form an intention – an ontological concern, we might say – which is at once a grasp and a yearning. This paper values the idea of the individual narrative in educational research. We begin to see that the discourse on adult education in Ireland could begin to incorporate this type of enquiry more seriously, not just from an anecdotal perspective which we are all very familiar with. More research should be done which applies a discourse analysis approach to the deconstruction of data (gathered from semi-structured and unstructured interviews) from adult learners and adult educators of their thoughts and ideas of the adult education and adult learning. Future research could use a highly reflexive hermeneutic which would support any theory generated from a literature review and subsequent data collection. It is legitimate to examine more complex and subtle areas of Freirean theory in order to create a research paradigm which attempts to examine the ontological and metaphysical nature of adult education. We can contend that an application of Freirean educational theory – one which is, therefore, constructed from the existentialist aspects of his work – can greatly contribute to the current discourse on adult education, in Ireland.

This application of *Freirean existentialism* has major implications for future research. Specifically, adult education policy development must not fall into

a pedagogical malaise whereby we solely acknowledge the economic benefits of adult education. In tandem with this concern, discussions such as the one in this paper, should be promoted as they will enhance the communicative, humanising, and transformative aspects of this area of education. These considerations can form a lens through which we can begin to consider our practice in adult education as a moral, and, even as a spiritual duty. By doing so we are confronted with the metaphysical nature of the adult education process. This complex process of teaching and learning, and the effects on our being which that procedure produces, can open new and innovative ways of research. If there is one outstanding principle which our discussion has attempted to highlight, it is that adult educators must not see the adult learners as objects among other objects in-the-world. Rather they must see learners as subjects confronted with other subjects in-the-world. This can happen through authentic dialogue, and this can be done by the educator dialogically rejecting any subject/object dichotomies present in the educational relationship. This paper has interpreted 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). Dialogue is the foundation of our pedagogy. Freire explains how dialogue is a powerful tool when he says:

Educators do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of 'salvation', but in order to come to know through dialogue with them, both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation - the various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist. (Freire, 2005, pp. 72–74)

Being inspired by this thought, we must move away from the functionalist perspective that has dominated adult education research and policy making in recent years. We must aspire to the type of education which speaks to peoples' highest aspirations (Fleming, 2004). Therefore, we must develop a more heightened, caring, vocational, and critical approach to our educational practice and our educational relationship with adult learners.

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