Hopes and Worries in Learning to Grow Together: Key Praxiological Lessons for the Adult Educator

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of one adult educator's engagement with Freire's praxis through teaching horticulture. The principal belief of the paper is that engaging in critical dialogue and reflexive action is an evolving journey of unlearning and hope for both learners and educators. The paper suggests that trusting in Freire's humanising education has implications beyond individual adult learners to encompass larger socio-ecological issues of our time.

Keywords: Freire, Praxis, Humanising Education, Horticulture, Sustainability

Introduction

This practice paper explores one adult educator's 'laborious' journey – so-called because the educator is continually tasked with working with one's 'self' and 'others' – on a specially designed Horticulture Local Training Initiative (LTI) programme in Cork City (see below). A number of qualitative observations, self-reflections and critical incidents are drawn upon to make 'sense and sensibility' (O'Brien, 2016) of how it is we learn to 'grow together' with our learners on this programme. We describe the adult education experience more in terms of engaging in 're-connection' than in 'inclusion' and we demonstrate transformative learning as hopeful and worrisome, uneven and uncertain. Key praxiological lessons are highlighted for the adult educator which help us to understand how we can work together within the system while also strategically critiquing it and seeking to make it better. Finally, we hope to demonstrate how Freire's concept of praxis is particularly close to the ecological themes of this adult education programme – that while such links may be worrisome at the outset, they may also provide hope for local and global communities looking to build capacity and resilience in the face of such issues as food security, biodiversity loss and climate change.

The Context – One Horticulture LTI Programme in Cork City

The Horticulture LTI is a full-time community training course located on the grounds of Ardfoyle Convent in Ballintemple, a suburb of Cork City. It is funded by the Cork Education and Training Board (ETB) and sponsored by The Bessborough Centre. The programme offers a QQI Level 4 Major Award in Horticulture and, while most work towards this goal, there is space for learners to partake in the learning without completing all of the modules necessary to attain the major award. An average of 10 to 14 learners attain their awards each year. Learners from the ages of 18 to 62 have completed the programme and there is on average an 80% male cohort each year. The learners' literacy levels are widely varied - learners who left school at primary level learn alongside graduates. The learners are predominantly long-term unemployed and can be battling with poor mental health, drug/alcohol misuse, trauma, low self-esteem and/or poverty.

Within the definition of an LTI there is space to create highly individualised, learner-responsive and community-based programmes. Programme design is grounded in the principles of community development, with a focus on project-based and experiential learning. On the Horticulture LTI programme individual learner plans are designed; some learners can engage in integrated literacy work, while others can work towards additional Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) qualifications. The small size of the class means that learners and staff can partake in consensus decision-making as much as possible and feedback can continually be requested and acted upon. Consequently, the course is constantly evolving to facilitate a more learner-informed curriculum design. Teachers regularly communicate regarding learners' concerns, interests and abilities and the curriculum is constantly developed in order to fully integrate the social and therapeutic benefits of horticulture and promote learner wellbeing. This curriculum approach seeks to support the learners to build positive peer-learning relationships, to connect to place through landscape photography, to develop a love of learning by understanding how adults learn, to enjoy the physical benefits of project-based horticulture training, and to 'give back' through meaningful community planting projects and events.

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What follows is a forthright and critical appraisal of one educator's (the lead author's) experiences of working with adult learners on this Horticulture LTI programme. In critical dialogue, we (both authors) draw together

key praxiological lessons for the adult educator. We hope to show that transformative learning is often messy and unknown and involves a great deal of 'self' and 'other' work. Far from the praxis 'ideal', then, we are keen to 'turn critical theory back on itself' (O'Sullivan, 2006) and show that praxis is itself a 'laborious' journey. The following key praxiological lessons were identified, though we know that there are many others 'still in the making'.

Learner Struggles

It was clear from the outset of the programme that one learner in particular – and others who I had not yet developed deeper relations with – had embodied the 'teacher as expert' ideal. There was a certain security attaching to this value – for many years of formal schooling and beyond it was this teacher ideal that had become familiar, normalised. Freire challenges us to become authentic educators. In my case this meant explaining that 'I am no expert'; that 'I do not have a degree in horticulture'; and that 'I consider myself to be an enthusiastic gardener who is happy to learn alongside you [the learners]'. I noted in critical reflection how this teacher ideal transition was particularly difficult for one adult learner and that others, too, needed some convincing. It was also difficult for the learners to accept a degree of responsibility for their own learning and practise some curricular and assessment choices of their own making.

At the beginning of the first year of the programme I explained that we would grow plants together as a group to help us develop our project work. We all agreed to this approach yet in practice one particular learner separated what they sowed, placed them in the best spot in the greenhouse and took extra care of them. In response to this observation, I facilitated a critical group discussion around competition versus supportive teamwork, discussing ideas like 'do we really own plants?' and that a fundamental part of our ethos is to use our skills and materials to support each other and to impact our local communities. This learner was dismissive during discussions and continued to behave competitively, caring only for the plants he sowed and comparing his work with others to show himself in 'a better light'. I found that the support that the teacher needs to give learners who sometimes 'resist' is problematic because this support needs to be humanising and not humanitarian. There is a significant amount of 'unlearning' that needs to be facilitated, too. I take my duty of care very seriously and I teach because I want to help people and I believe that the work matters. I needed to remind myself that much of my habitual thinking and behaviour is system-based and that this itself needs to be challenged. In effect, both I and this learner found ourselves wandering in unfamiliar terrain without

any absolute direction. Rather than reacting to this learner's behaviour and labelling it as 'problematic', I kept in mind a reflective prompt from one of Dr. Karen Treisman's workshops – 'behaviour is communication'. Now I considered broader messages that he might be communicating to me and the group. While he certainly appeared resistant to the collaborative way of working, he did engage (in a parallel way) with the activity of growing plants with the group. Perhaps this adult learner needed to assert his individual identity within the group setting; he may have even needed to 'win' as he saw fit. Nevertheless, I was keen to ensure (as far as possible) that our collaborative culture was not going to fall apart by allowing him to express himself in the way that he felt that he needed to. Collaboration with like-minded individuals, we (the authors) later reflected, is easy. But collaborating in transformative learning experiences with individuals with different worldviews and learning perspectives, attitudes and behaviours often means embracing contested moments and 'heated' debates and allowing the space for diversity to be more authentically valued and held within the group. Through critical dialogue, adult education can bring the learning of the group towards the individual rather than the other way around. And for this learner he was, we reflected, at least exposed to a transformational learning experience as the group encountered and 'moved towards' him.

Engaging in critical dialogue with the learners was certainly challenging. Most agreed with the ethos and enjoyed the debates, though some appeared resentful and critically vocal. Discussions on topics such as poverty, homelessness and mental health were lively and engaging as myself and the learners would have similar views and share similar socio-economic backgrounds. Engaging in critical dialogue on topics where you have similar experiences and can empathise can be more straightforward. However, critically discussing issues where you might share fundamentally different views, in my case on education and gender, can prove to be the most rewarding. Reflecting openly with the learners on my beliefs about learning and asking them to do the same, and questioning the very system that I was also asking them to 'buy into', turned out to be incredibly challenging. Ultimately, as I noted in later critical reflections, this critical dialogue was empowering for us. Specifically, it enabled us to see ourselves as learning together in the hope of nurturing positive personal and social change. Critical dialogue became the most powerful way of strengthening our learning relationships, building trust and motivating us to creatively explore how and what we would do to learn and create this change. Transformation in this respect was not smooth or even – the change narrative does not end with the re-formed learner that sparked this journey or with me as the complete

emancipatory educator. Rather, the learner leaves the course in what we can only politely term as 'uncomfortable' circumstances. I have observed over the years that there can be no accomplished adult learners; just real people engaging in complex relational, cognitive and emotional explorations that are often gritty and not instantly rewarding. As educators attempting to model Freirean ideals we may 'sow the seeds' but we 'do not reap the harvest'. Perhaps we can never produce a complete 'product' (to put it crudely) if we hope that our own engagement is more fully authentic and humanising.

The Apprehensive Teacher

Some adults join a course in the hope of hiding in a safe place from the challenges and traumas of living in poverty and unemployment. It can seem irresponsible not to take a directive lead in teaching, especially when you care for your learners who may be battling depression, drug/alcohol misuse, abusive relationships or homelessness. Sometimes the lofty ideals of Freirean teaching can seem 'out-of-reach' or 'too scholarly' for so-called 'hard hands' or 'practical' learners who are facing more immediate life concerns. But of course, Freire encourages learning to reflect those very 'lived experiences'. It can seem cruel or 'inhumane' to bring wider social and political problems into a learning space where people feel that they may have nothing else but problems. Putting faith in praxis and the power of critical dialogue is a tall ask in such circumstances. But fundamental questions (or significant moments of 'problem-posing') need to be worked upon by the teacher. It may be important to remind oneself that learners might find welcome relief in a safe, secure learning space where their dignity, worldviews and feelings are collectively honoured and healthily challenged. Developing trust amongst a community of learners is the linchpin of the practice of humanising education. Trust means that the learners do not need our paternalistic/maternalistic protection from 'problems'. And for the educator it may mean developing over time with learners a level of political consciousness that is attuned to world realities, not separate from them. Indeed, it may be essential to link everyday problems to wider social and political systems in the hope that such systems are not seen as 'natural'. Systems are made by people (those in oft dominant power positions) and therefore can be changed by people (those in oft 'oppressed' power positions but who are committed to new change). It is hard for the teacher, as well as the learners, to see learning in such 'power-full' ways, but as Freire remarks '[education] cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion' (Freire, 2013, p.34).

I have had to learn to trust that engaging in critical dialogue around poverty, trauma, oppression, food security and the environment would be positively stimulating in some political way and that this might prompt positive personal/social changes. My language here is deliberately cautious because I am not some blind indoctrinated follower of Freire (nor do I believe that he would approve of such acritical 'followers'). I had read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and was excited to engage in praxis with my learners but as to what we would achieve together, I had no idea. I was hopeful that we could make our lives a little better and Freire affirmed for me that:

> Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 2018, p.72).

Knowing that I was not an 'expert' helped me to open up to critical dialogue and take the lead from the learners. At the beginning of the horticultural science and personal development modules I gave everyone the module descriptor and we discussed how we could engage with different ecological topics. I asked the learners if there were other learning ways (e.g. films) through which we could capture different perspectives. We discussed how we could work creatively together to bring these topics to life. Throughout years of learning engagement, I have come to trust learner 'feedback' and build the learning events around diverse learners' needs, interests and abilities. I have learned that 'hot debates' and 'problem-posing challenges' were precisely the learning moments that had the learners turning up every day and that motivated them to learn. As one adult learner told me:

> it's not like the standardized learning you get in most places. Our teachers devise ways for how to do theory that makes it interesting and gets everyone included in hot debates […] There is always a challenge to face daily which only helps us to grow as humans (McCarthy, 2020, Conversation with Adult Learner, July 2017).

Hopes and Worries Aligning Freire and Learning about Sustainable Horticulture

Critical dialogue may be facilitated through personal development, communication and work experience modules and there is always hope that such work yields personal and social benefits for all participants. Yet the challenge remains to make the subject knowledge itself relevant to the lived

experiences of learners and to put in situ facilitators who have the necessary personal/professional attributes and competences to design, enable and evaluate appropriate learning modules. I found it difficult to continue to carry out praxis when it came to the more subject-specific and plant science-based learning modules. I had printed out my favourite quotation from Freire and stuck it over my desk at work: 'Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information' (Freire, 2018, p.79). Yet I had no idea how to engage fully in this work with a set curriculum designed (at least conventionally) to provide surface level and rote learning. Indeed, when I tried to link Freire to socio-ecological concerns, I initially found his approach to 'nature' to be based predominantly on creationist/imperialist values. As an educator interested in connecting people to nature to improve their wellbeing, build capacity and resilience within the community, and spur action in the face of food security and climate change issues, I could not reconcile Freire to these most modern of movements. To me, humanising is not acting upon nature, demonstrating our command over it, and demonstrating our critical abilities and creativity in superiority to it. Our role as free humans is as carers and tenders to the natural world that ultimately sustains our life on this planet. For me, a humanising education reconnects us to the natural world, to the seasonality of life and to our place in our local eco-communities.

Perhaps Freire could not be expected to anticipate the latest climate justice movement developments. As a 'teachable moment', no doubt he might approve of the need to engage with 'sustainability' and other pressing socio-ecological and political concerns. As an entry point to this work, we began learning about sustainable horticulture, biodiversity loss and food security as 'enthusiastic gardeners'. While we discussed, researched and designed local responses to connecting people to plants and growing their own food in an urban setting, I re-discovered my fundamental difficulties with Freire's own representations of nature. I may have allowed my negative emotive responses to (what I saw as) Freire's 'insensitivity' to modern-day sustainability concerns to blind me to wider educational issues at hand. I was, I reflected later, trying to 'fit' everything neatly together – Freire and sustainability – in order to positively promote social action in my teaching. I shared with the learners my perceived difficulties with aligning Freire's creationist/imperialist values on 'nature' and what values 'we' might wish to hold on this course. How could Freire be useful when I (the teacher) found his representations of nature out of step with 'our' sustainability principles and values? I needed others' perspectives – to talk this through (critical dialogue) and ultimately realise that it is okay not to agree with

each particular aspect of Freire's approach. Perhaps 'discord', 'challenge', 'dissent' are natural features of a humanising education? Freire's ideas, too, are of their time and can be responded to differently. I have learned that we can create praxiological approaches that are 'in tune' with our own time, place and people. My focus on Freire's humanising education through caring critical dialogue and authentic action is closely aligned to sustainability goals. Sustainability, after all, involves 'ways of living […] grounded in a reflexive value system that requires continuous learning to respond to ever-changing circumstances' (Souza et al., 2019, p.3).

Conclusion

Emerging from my observations, self-reflections and critical incidents over the years, and from our critical dialogue on same, is a clearer 'sense and sensibility' (O'Brien, 2016) of how it is we learn to 'grow together' on this programme. Within the restraints of a hierarchal system of education (e.g. different QQI levels), it is not easy to practise critical pedagogy. Critical reflection requires time, space and effort that are not easily afforded in 'official' curricula. But carving out spaces for quiet contemplation or lively debate is what we do when we landscape a garden. Problem-posing together humanises learners and ourselves – it allows space for our passions and emotions to be expressed and engaged with. It can lead to action and can improve wellbeing at the same time – creating real learning (epistemological) and real identity (ontological) connections. Yet for such connections to happen, the teacher and learners need at some appropriate stage to challenge fatalism and commit to some change. This change is neither smooth or certain. And it can be small changes, such as a greater connection to the seasons or to the local community. We have a small exhibition of the learners' landscape photographs every year, where the learners each choose one photograph to exhibit and explain their choices. One learner's photograph appeared very drab – it was of a dark wall with an old window box sparsely planted with small, unimpressive plants in early Spring. When asked why he chose this 'dull' photo, he said that he did not believe when he planted it that it could turn out to be as beautiful and full of life as it became; that a small effort makes big changes down the line. This was a powerful metaphor for me. Taking part in structured horticultural activities offers the opportunity to improve life skills such as initiative, team working, problem-solving, communication, patience, concentration, numeracy and literacy – all necessary skills for critical citizenry. Freire offers us hope and opportunity to create for ourselves local solutions to pressing socio-ecological and global concerns.

And Freire enables us to see that the educational project is always incomplete, which may explain, indeed necessitate, its persistence.

From a teacher's perspective, it is reassuring to know that technical knowledge and political formation are inter-connected. We our 'selves' are tasked with overcoming systemic and ideological prejudices. We are challenged to see transformation as messy, as ephemeral, as lifelong. While the capacity for personal and social change is always there, it is never a given. In the way of seeing anew is seeing the same – doctrinaire thinking and action is likely to be the dominant 'reality' for learners and our 'selves'. Yet, for all these worries, there are hopes. We have found that the cycle of reflection, dialogue and action (praxis) is often difficult but often rewarding. It sustains us in our work, in our commitment to 'others' and it challenges us to be creative – to re-design curricula and assessment with diverse learners at the core; to teach in 'other' ways; to be tolerant, trusting and risk-taking professionals. 'Ecological' practices are not just concerned with the relationships between plants and animals and the environment in which they live; ecological practices are essentially human activities. Thus, while I teach about the technical science of horticulture it is possible to purposively mobilise a 'green education' which, at the very least, counters dominant knowledge and identity forms. In this way, it is possible to rethink 'the way things are', to experience education as being connected to the world and to even become caught up in transformation. In this praxiological way, education itself is presented as the means to respond to the much bigger question: 'How should we live together – with each other and with nature?'

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