

# An Educator's Dilemma

ALISON MCCALLION

---

## **Introduction**

After a recent trip to Sweden I was faced with a new dilemma as an educator. How could I incorporate and teach a transformative and political curriculum in tandem with a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 3 module in horticulture? By doing so I hoped I could help the adults I encountered on a daily basis to grow in confidence, to learn, to participate more fully in life and to convince them that collectively we can make a difference to our environment and possibly the world around us.

I was walking through a small town in Sweden called Orebro. It was a medieval town with a castle, quite a quaint and beautiful place. As I wandered down the main street I came to a square and there I stood thinking what a coincidence. I could not believe there in front of me was the Hard Rain Exhibition I had seen in Dublin's National Botanic Gardens. The Hard Rain Exhibition includes stunning photographs illustrating the lyrics of Bob Dylan's classic early song 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall.' Mark Edwards, an internationally acclaimed photographer, devised the Exhibition. His pictures have been seen by millions around the world and depict the related problems of climate change, poverty and environmental destruction.

I had visited this exhibition with a group of women from the Travelling Community only a few months prior and was amazed to see it again in such a small town. At the time in Orebro, I did not quite realise the consequences of this happening for my practice. I had thought it was just a strange coincidence

and had wished that my students had seen it in another country and in a different environment but still starkly sending out the same important message to the people of Sweden.

It was sometime later after journaling my thoughts and reflecting on the experience of seeing the exhibition in Sweden and in Dublin that a new insight into my practice emerged. This would push my practice forward and give me the impetus to experiment once again with my learning to teach and the political teachings of Paulo Freire. The experience of seeing this exhibition twice outside of the classroom unveiled my responsibilities as an educator and the connection that extends beyond the classroom walls between us as human as part of this world.

### **The political curriculum**

I knew from reading Freire's writings that it was possible to make the curriculum political:

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the learner into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it or it becomes the practice of freedom.

(Freire, 1972, p.56)

Before the incidents mentioned above I believed education should be liberating, however, I struggled with making it political. Initially working with students I made a decision not to make the subjects I taught political. I was unsure as to how this was possible; unsure how to make the political teachings of Paulo Freire a reality while teaching in the traditional system of education. However, the visit to Sweden answered some of these questions. Reflecting on the experience in Sweden I realised there was something in this chance happening in Orebro. It seemed I encountered Mezirow's 'disorientating dilemmas';

the disorienting dilemma may be evoked by an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or by one's efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one's presuppositions. Anomalies and dilemmas of which old ways of knowing cannot make sense become catalysts or 'trigger events' that

precipitate critical reflection and transformations.’ Changing social norms can make it much easier to encounter, entertain, and sustain changes in alternative perspectives.

(Mezirow, 1990, p.14)

I wrote about my thoughts and the meaning of the exhibition. I explored the implications for my practice as an educator while teaching horticulture. It has been argued that ‘learning is the transformation of experience into knowledge, skills and attitudes and to recognise this occurs through a variety of processes’ (Jarvis, 1987, p.8). I learned as I reflected on the experiences; while I had seen the Hard Rain exhibition before in Dublin, seeing it in Sweden was somehow different.

My perspective was changing. Mezirow (1990, p.14) states that;

perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.

In Dublin I was somehow disconnected from the exhibition. I had found it disturbing and intriguing but it had failed to connect with me on a personal level. I had failed to make the connection between the pictures and my personal responsibility. Seeing the same exhibition a second time, but this time outside of my role of teacher, I recognised its meaning and saw its significance and power once again. However, this time it was a chance as discussed by Horton and Freire (1990, p. 157);

to know better what they know already. Knowing better means precisely going beyond the common sense in order to begin to discover the reason for the facts.

It seems that venturing out into this world, which I had always believed was beneficial for students, was equally as valuable for me as an educator and as an individual.

### **Uncovering new learning**

Mezirow (1990, p.13) argues that;

by far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection – reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting.

I had become aware now of the many possibilities for learning in life and the connection of these to my profession. Disconnection had been an issue for me. Previously I had been disconnected from the subject of horticulture until I realised that in fact horticulture is part of who I am, part of my fondest memories. My difficulty had been that I perceived the subject as separate to who I am as an educator. Upon realising my connection with the subject it became easier to teach. This connection or disconnection seemed to be surfacing again. I had visited the ‘Hard Rain Exhibition’ in Dublin and had learned a lot but I had not really changed, I had not really taken any responsibility or changed my actions as part of the experience. However seeing the exhibition in a different country, out of context, while out of my role as educator, out of my own environment, I was able to stand back from it and reflect on it in a slightly different way. It suddenly struck me how small the world is and how reliant we are on each other. I am reliant on the people of Sweden to make changes just as much as they are reliant on the people of Ireland. We were connected and I realised the connection between the exhibition and myself. I am part of this world and I have a part to play. I needed to change how I lived my life and how I educated. As a result of this experience I now feel a sense of duty to raise these political and environmental issues in the classroom. A new transformative and political agenda was forming which needed to be incorporated in the classroom but how could I convince the students that this was important?

The answers lay in my own journey of learning that happened with and without the students. The answers had emerged not in the classroom but out participating in the world. We had ventured firstly into the garden and then beyond its walls. I had found an unexpected space for learning for both the students and myself.

### **A different space for learning**

Students enter classrooms and

... bring with them inside of them, in their bodies, in their lives; they bring their hopes, despair, expectations, knowledge, which they got by living, by fighting, by becoming frustrated. Undoubtedly they don't come here empty. They arrive full of things. In most of the cases they bring with them opinions about the world, about life. They bring with them their knowledge.  
(Horton and Freire, 1990, p.157)

However as a result of previous negative experiences of education their personal histories and experiences become suppressed within the four walls of the classroom. I think there may be a case for journeying with the students back out into the very world they live in and have learned in, to create a different space for learning, one where they can re-discover themselves and their responsibilities.

Many adults' previous experiences of education and the classroom have been far from liberating, participative or indeed educational. They learned truths about themselves that were in fact created by the powerful education institutions that they were part of at the time. The adults I have encountered returned to education with literacy difficulties, feeling inferior to others in society; they have not felt whole or capable. Their previous experience of early education, as discussed by Dewey (1997), has been a mis-educative one. His belief that;

all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative... For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.

(Dewey, 1997, p.25)

Their mis-educative experiences have affected more than just their ability to read and write; it has affected their sense of identity, their ability to socialise and voice their opinions. It has affected their confidence, their self-esteem and their participation in life. Finally, it has affected their belief in their ability to learn again.

Those who are labelled slow, weak, dull, stupid and so forth are socialised into a culture of failure and self-blame. Their failure is attributed to an intrinsic characteristic within themselves (lack of ability), and they feel it is a personal weakness or fault of their part. They learn implicitly that the structures of society or of education are not at fault; rather it is the individual who is to blame.

(Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p.235)

If education, as proposed by Freire (1972), is to be truly ‘liberating’ these people need to see not only improvements in their reading and writing, but more importantly they need to believe that they are intelligent, capable and a valuable asset in today’s society. They need to understand the impact their early classroom experiences and society has had on who they are today. Working in a space outside the classroom helped me and my students understand these very things.

### **A curriculum for personal transformation**

Initially teaching horticulture outside the classroom, in the garden, it became obvious students found it easier to be themselves there. Their issues of disconnection, lack of voice and responsibility were less obvious in that environment. By teaching through the medium of the garden it seemed possible that ‘what the educator does in teaching is make it possible for the students to be themselves’ (Horton and Freire, 1990, p.181). Being removed from the classroom seemed to have a positive effect on the students. Themes emerged as a result of comparing how the students were in the classroom and how they were while working in the garden. These themes became the new curriculum for personal transformation. Mayo suggests that ‘committed educators would re-interpret mandates in the light of their own radical agendas and therefore be in and against the state’ (Mayo, 1999, p.137). The student’s personal transformation became the new radical agenda in conjunction with the curriculum. Freire discusses ‘how is it possible before transforming society to deny students the knowledge they need to survive’ (Freire, 1987, p.67). In order to survive students need to learn new subjects and develop their reading and writing; this is one type of knowledge. Is understanding oneself and the role society has played in creating who you are today another knowledge that is needed in order to survive before transforming society? I have found that understanding these issues has helped students combat the effects of their earlier negative experiences of education. As educators can we deny adults this space to uncover this knowledge?

As adults return to education to learn new subject knowledge they return to the physical surrounds of the classroom. This can bring back negative memories of school, where they were labelled 'stupid', and in some cases, raised even more difficult experiences. Being in a classroom was a reminder for them of all of those mis-educative experiences. To combat these memories it seems it is necessary to spend time creating an environment that is safe and conducive to learning. Dewey (1997, p.37) observes;

every experience affects for better or worse the attitudes which help decide the quality of further experiences, by setting up certain preference and aversion, and making it easier or harder to act for this or that end.

However, maybe it is more than creating a safe space within the classroom. Maybe we need to find alternative spaces for learning other than the classroom. From my experience the school garden, the National Botanic Gardens and the 'Hard Rain Exhibition' in Sweden were these types of alternative spaces. Being outdoors had surprising consequences for learning and in fact was a more productive setting for undoing the student's mis-educative experiences of the past. Bringing adult education to more neutral surroundings helped the students and me break free of our oppressive habits of being in the classroom.

### **Finding their voice**

Within the college garden it was easier to invite students into the conversation and they found it easier to participate;

If we wish to hear respondents' stories, then we must invite them into our work as collaborators, sharing control with them, so that together we try to understand what their stories are about.

(Polkinghorne, 1988, p.164)

It seemed a safer place, a place where they were more confident and at ease. Listening to these stories in this environment had many positive outcomes. I found from previous research that acknowledging their stories actually acknowledged the existence of the individual; it helped them to feel valued. As students accessed their memories and told their stories in these more neutral surroundings it led to a deeper understanding of who they were;

The outcomes of our learning are stored in our memories and so memory is crucial to our self-understanding, sense of identity and even to the autonomy and freedom we can exercise. In a real sense our memories are 'the treasures within' (Delors, 1996) that contribute a great deal to making us who we are.

(Jarvis, 2006, p.119)

These stories often hold the key to personal transformation. They voice issues, truths or beliefs that are preventing further growth or personal transformation. I found it is possible through listening to these stories to develop a new radical agenda that can address some of the untruths or distorted beliefs affecting the students' further development. This approach was radical for me because for many years personal transformation in students seemed a mystery or a by-product of education. Now it seems it is possible to deliberately incorporate it as an additional agenda within the classroom.

Often times there are similarities between students' stories. This can create connection where once there was none. It can bond the group and generate new excitement and energy.

As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognising one another's presence.

(Hooks, 1994, p.8)

Through their experience of early education the students I met had become voiceless. Freire refers to this early or traditional educational approach as the 'banking concept' (Freire, 1972, p.46). The banking concept limits the role of the student to listening and storing information that is dictated to them by the educator. Students mentioned they learned from this method of educating; the teacher was always right; questioning was not allowed or discouraged; you listened; did what you were told and opinions were not valued. Sharing stories in the garden initially gives voice to these students who were once oppressed in early education. It can be a first step to healing the damage of those early oppressive experiences and help them to participate more actively in the classroom, and quite possibly, the world.

Students enter the classroom knowing things. As time progresses it becomes safe to share, question and explore their stories both inside and outside the classroom. I think it is important to help the students analyse what they know already and how they came to know it. A method I use is Freire's 'problem posing' (Freire, 1972, p.52). This is described as an educational method which 'embodies communication' (Freire, 1972, p.52) as a two way process. In its simplest form it can be described as when the educator 'turns a statement by the group into a question to be explored' (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989, p.143). An example of this could be asking a student for alternative reasons why they can't spell when they say 'I can't spell because I'm stupid.' Problem posing encourages the process of not taking things for granted, but questioning and investigating. Through this process students 'achieve a deepening awareness of both the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality through action upon it' (Freire, 1972, p.27). By using this technique students challenge their existing assumptions about themselves and their world. As discussed by Mezirow (1990, p.13) 'adulthood is the time for reassessing the assumptions of our formative years that have often resulted in distorted views of reality.' Adult education can be an opportunity, if given the space, to rediscover their suppressed voices and connect with their own power and responsibility.

### **Uncovering our responsibility**

My own personal responsibility to this planet and the other humans inhabiting it began to emerge while out participating in life, with a group of women from the Travelling Community. This was a community programme, which was student led with the curriculum developed to address student needs and interests. As an educator who is humanistic in my approach and believes in a person centred philosophy, with principles;

Such as everyone has the right to belong and be included, everyone has the right to participate and be heard, everyone has the right to freedom of speech and expressions, difference is enriching, and people have the right to question and challenge those in authority.

(Connolly and Ryan, 1999, pp.118-119)

I can reflect these principles on these programmes by designing the curriculum in partnership with the students and by going on outings suggested by the group. I always believed outings were important for many reasons. Like working in the garden, I found it takes the students out of their normal environment, i.e. classroom,

community or area and in some cases takes the students to new places and gives them new experiences to ponder. It is a trip into the unknown and another opportunity to get to know the students on a different level, without the unwanted, possibly learned constraints of the classroom. It was an opportunity for learning and conversation. However, the trip to the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin did much more than this. As Freire discusses human beings should be 'treated as subjects who can know and act on the world, whose task is to emerge from their condition ... and to intervene in reality' (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1989, p.34). During this outing something magical happened, the students became the subject and suddenly became aware of their responsibility and their power to impact on their world.

### **Intervening in reality**

As normal I asked the students where they would like to go and they suggested the Botanic Gardens. Coincidentally the Hard Rain Exhibition was in the Gardens at the time. As we ambled through the gardens on that beautiful May day, with the tulips in full bloom, we stumbled across the exhibition lining the pathway between the trees, a perfect setting I thought, which was in stark contrast to the shocking and informative nature of the pictures taken from around the world. The pictures spoke a thousand words and I was reminded of the value of using pictures as a tool for learning, particularly with students who had literacy difficulties. Burns suggests;

Pictures can be used in a variety of ways. First, they can act as a trigger to connect people to experiences and emotions that can open up lines of inquiry and interpretations that might not have been envisaged otherwise. Second, they can be a representation of the subconscious that can help us to conceptualise a system, understand a set of issues and so.

(Burns, 2007, p.117)

I thought afterwards how these pictures could be used in many different ways and Freire (1972) suggests the use of educational methods such as coding and decoding. The educator first gets the group to examine something like an object or picture that is related to their lives. They describe what they see in the picture and then through discussion they are moved to relate what they see to their own lives. Thus the code: the picture in this case, is explored and when related to their life is decoded. By describing what they see, it is non-threatening and it makes them aware of their perceptions about reality. Making the students aware can lead to changes in their perceptions, based upon the discussions. Unknown to me this is in fact what we were doing with these pictures. They raised many issues and as we chatted we

learned from each other. We discussed the issues depicted such as the destruction of the rainforests, tsunamis and global warming. As we discussed these issues, we related it to our own lives and how we lived. We debated how we each contributed to global warming. We discussed our reliance on nature and trees for the very oxygen we breathe and our role in preserving this source of life. I also shared with them the knowledge I had gained a few weeks prior in the gardens, that many trees like these were being used for research in finding cures to diseases such as cancer. Sharing this information with the students helped to re-enforce the benefits of supporting and protecting our environment and our world. This was truly a remarkable space for learning.

All of the pictures at this exhibition posed problems of a different nature from across the world. As we wandered down the pathway through the gardens with no tables or walls to divide or confine us, we discussed the problems posed within these pictures.

Through dialogue, the teacher of the students and the student of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teaches. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.

(Freire, 1972, p.53).

The students drove the conversation through questions, sharing of opinions and ideas. They seemed intrigued by what they saw. Within those gardens there was so much to learn about our world. Now I wonder what other possible learning spaces and opportunities exist in our towns and cities and beyond?

This coincidental happening of the exhibition and the outing worked as a new and different way of learning and there are possibly more of these opportunities available to us if we are tuned into learning happening in this accidental way. This type of expedition and trip out into our world had made the subject of horticulture political, however this had been by chance and it was not at the time a deliberate effort on my part to make the subject so overtly political.

As educator I thought this was a different way of learning and one that could be used again, while teaching other subjects in order to make the curriculum political and transformative, it was a matter of seeking out these new settings and surroundings for learning. It also reminded me of the valuable use of pictures in education and

Freire's (1972) techniques of problem posing and coding and decoding. Now I am working with a new class, teaching horticulture. Our classes are no longer just about the prescribed curriculum and achieving the specified learning outcomes. The subject of horticulture is a political one and its content includes global warming, climate change, our carbon footprint and the steps we can take to make a difference. Throughout this module we discuss environmental issues as raised on the Change.ie website (URL: [www.change.ie](http://www.change.ie))

I couldn't take my new class to the 'Hard Rain Exhibition', so I decided to bring the pictures to the classroom and use them as we did in the gardens, it helped but I still feel being out there in the world made a difference to our learning, somehow it was more real, more relevant and we were connected with the world. My subjects are becoming more political, stemming from my experiences outside of the classroom. I now feel personally responsible and want to make a difference and convince others that they can make a difference too. As Freire states:

Man's ontological vocation is to be a subject, who acts upon and transforms his world, and in doing so moves towards ever-new possibilities of a fuller and richer life individually and collectively.

(Freire, 1972, p.12)

Raising these political issues gives us a choice to act and transform our world and in doing so provides possibilities for improving how we live and the world we live in.

I had missed this overtly political learning opportunity with the students studying horticulture FETAC Level 3 in 2007-2008. I had however seen the benefits of working in the garden. I had seen the students take responsibility for the college gardens, while some took responsibility for their own gardens and some other aspects of their own lives. As the garden grew they seemed to grow too. I had decided not to make these classes political and had decided to focus on the personal transformation of the students. It now seems it was possible to do both.

## Conclusion

As a result of working with students in the garden, engaging with them on different field trips and reflecting on these and my own personal expeditions, I have developed a personal sense of connection with the world. Reflection and action have continued to affect my practice and as Freire (1972, p.42) states ‘those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly’ (Freire, 1972, p.42).

In hindsight from re-examination of the academic subject and myself, I have learned that horticulture opens up many possible avenues of discussion with the students. In fact this subject is an opportunity to learn about our environment and the preservation of our world that is central to our survival. It is also about transforming our world and making our planet a more beautiful place, capable of sustaining life. Through adult education there are opportunities for us as educators to take responsibility for our world and how we live and to convince others that they can do the same.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead (1901-1978)

Now as an educator, my being in this world, my experiences of this world have become more central to how and what I learn, thus impacting on how and what I teach. I have also learned that moving out into this world, while journeying with the students, can have surprising consequences. Working in adult education now is about journeying with students, getting to know them, through the telling of their stories. It is a process whereby we are the subjects to be explored, in tandem with the curriculum. It is about getting to know our world, so that we can participate more fully in it. It is about experiencing the world in the classroom, not just experiencing a subject in isolation to the world. It is about finding new spaces that can unify us and connect us, as we learn how we impact on this world and begin to share the responsibility of being part of this world.

*Alison McCallion is an adult literacy and basic education tutor mostly in Finglas and contributes to the Adult Basic Literacy and Education (ABLE) programme.*

*References*

- Burns, D. (2007). *Systemic Action Research: A Strategy for Whole System Change*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Connolly, B. & Ryan, A. (1999). *Women and Education in Ireland*. Volume 1, Maynooth: MACE.
- Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone.
- Drudy, S. & Lynch, K. (1993). *Schools and Society in Ireland*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.
- Freire, P. & Shor, I. (1987). *A Pedagogy for Liberation – Dialogues on Transforming Education*. London: Macmillan.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge.
- Horton, M. & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Jarvis, P. (2006). *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Kirkwood, G. & Kirkwood, C. (1989). *Living Adult Education: Freire in Scotland*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Mayo, P. (1999). *Gramsci, Freire and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative Action*. London: Zed Books.
- Mead, M. URL: [www.change.ie](http://www.change.ie)
- Mezirow, J. and Associates (1990). *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. New York: SUNY Press.