

Beyond Redemption? Locating the Experience of Adult Learners and Educators

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Introduction: theory and praxis in adult education

Our aim is to continue the conversation initiated by Denis O’Sullivan in the 2008 issue of the *Adult Learner*. Any opportunity to critically reflect, to think anew and to re-imagine adult education through debate and dialogue is welcome and it is in that spirit that we respond. We wholeheartedly agree that ‘adult educators should not be outside the remit of their own theorising’ (O’Sullivan, 2008, p.29), but subject their own ideas, assumptions and practices to critical scrutiny. O’Sullivan raises several important points about the nature of Irish adult education and the need to develop a rigorous theoretical basis for our work. We wish to engage with his observations on the prevalence of ‘redemptive’ discourses in Irish adult education. In particular we want to reflect upon O’Sullivan’s concern with how adult educators can ‘maintain a transformative role while respecting the integrity of our students as co-participants in the process’ (2008, p.14).

In our response, we will briefly outline how we understand the relationship between praxis and theory and how this shapes our conception of the role of the learner and the educator in adult education. In offering this analysis we understand that it is partial, necessarily incomplete and continuing the dialogue began by O’Sullivan.

Beyond redemption? Locating the experience of adult learners and educators

O'Sullivan's critique of what he terms 'redemptive' approaches to adult education is based on its 'vanguardism, limited reflexivity and circumscribed student agency' (2008, p.21). Such ideas and discourses are at work in adult education influenced by the pervasive influence of Catholic social teaching in Ireland that O'Sullivan describes. Just how deeply rooted this redemptive phenomenon is amongst religious and secular Irish educators has been critically explored by Hussey (1999, p.44) based on his experience in community theatre.

I have asked participants to describe how they see themselves at work and to move towards a depiction of their vision of their role. The depiction is done visually by sculpting another participant into an image representing how they see themselves. By far the most popular image sculpted is that of a person standing, feet firmly grounded, head held high, with warm smile and wide, outstretched, inviting arms.

So when asked to physically express their educational ideal many practitioners chose to hold their hands outstretched like the famous statue that towers over Rio De Janiero. Hussey calls this 'The Jesus of Rio syndrome' in which education is seen as a form of care and charity given from a position of dominance. We agree with O'Sullivan that critical reflexivity is absolutely necessary to overcome the temptation to see oneself as a redeemer. However, we are a little less certain about the way that O'Sullivan uses this critique to describe a whole range of diverse ideas and practices within the field.

From our perspective the use of redemption as an overarching and all-encompassing discourse does not capture the diversity of developments that have taken place in Irish adult education over the past thirty years. In particular, we would point to the growth in critical, learner-centred education and the use of group learning in recent times. Group engagement in learning involves a radical re-positioning of learners, away from the individualist models promoted in mainstream education towards collective and transformative models of adult and community education. The critical perspective enables learners to actively reflect upon, politicise and re-shape their world. Radical and feminist educators attempt to embrace the direct experience of personal and political liberation as agents of change, rather than teaching others how and why to change. They identify their own need for emancipation and co-create a language of

possibility with learners. This stands in contrast to O’Sullivan’s view (2008, p.19) that the distinctive features of the redemptive discourse in adult education consist of ‘identifying *targets* for redemption and specifying their needs’ (our emphasis). In the former, learners identify their own needs and knowledge, rather than the other way around.

In keeping with the ethos of learner-centredness, we conducted a small piece of research among some of the adult learners we are working with, asking them to describe their understanding of adult and community education. The responses repeatedly cited self-directed learning and learner-centeredness as key characteristics of adult education. They also mentioned the importance of experience (which they transformed through learning); the role of adult education in achieving greater social equality; recognising the experience of alienation in other learning contexts and the need to belong; developing supportive learning (in which people learn from one another and co-construct knowledge); and creating more egalitarian relationships between tutors and learners. These responses, albeit gathered on a modest scale and briefly analysed, demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the ideas that underpin much of adult and community education and bear little resemblance to the redemptive discourse that O’Sullivan claims dominates adult education.

We think that it may well be more difficult to generalise about the culture, practices and ideas at work within adult education than O’Sullivan outlines. His analysis tends to smudge the differences between very distinctive approaches and tends to misrepresent adult education as a unified and univocal field. This lack of specificity means redemptive education is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere and the object of critique is only dimly and intermittently visible. However, by locating the debate almost exclusively within academic discourses, O’Sullivan misses the opportunity to locate it in practice.

Praxis, learning and pedagogy

One of the defining characteristics of adult education is its dual pedagogical role where participants – learners and educators – work together to co-create knowledge. This requires a critical questioning of the tendency to naturalise knowledge and instead explores how and why we create meaning. We, as adult educators and learners, learn to be reflexive about our practices and develop theory that is grounded in an engagement in practice. Instead of drawing boundaries between theoretical positions, we learn to accept the permeable

boundaries and bridges between theory and practice, as teaching and learning are inextricably interwoven.

A pedagogy of uncertainty can create a critical effect, by encouraging both learner and tutor to interrogate the discourses that influence how they interpret their own experiences. Thus, we can subvert normative discourses, identities and knowledges and go on to create new knowledge regarding transformation, emotion, agency, liberation, resistance and creativity. (Ryan, McCormack and Ryan, 2004, p.67)

Radical educators are concerned with the tension between articulating one's own political position and holding a learning space that allows learners to create knowledge for themselves. Always, there is an acceptance that outcomes are messy, contingent, revisable and partial. Many educators practise *phronesis*, or practical wisdom which 'requires full engagement in practical challenges, embracing mistakes and messes, insight through reflection and revision of personal practices' (de Guerre and Taylor, 2004, p.74).

Adult educators want to achieve greater exposure and currency for silenced or muted discourses that challenge the structures that reproduce injustice and inequality. They want to see learners emerge as active citizens concerned with these big philosophical issues of how we can act and think in ways that promote human and planetary well being. But they take the new knowledge from social movements into an *engagement* with learners. They do not act as initiators, inducting learners into certain approved ways of knowing. They are instead clearers of barriers; they seek to demystify so that coping, critiquing, resisting and creating are available to all in daily life (Ryan, McCormack and Ryan, 2004). As adult education practitioners and theorists, we need to pay more attention to analysing the nature of transformative learning and how it is *achieved*.

Conclusion

To be reflexive, as Bourdieu (1977; 2000) has tirelessly argued, demands that we pay attention to the way social conditions and power inform and authorise academic knowledge. We need to articulate our study of the field in such a way that we avoid traditional and familiar assumptions about the dominance of theory and naming above reflection and transformative action. Ensuring an ongoing and useful dialogue requires different parameters, some of which we have drawn attention to in this discussion. The conversation also needs to include sustained attention to important external forces that influence adult education (for instance national and global economic trends and the demands set by the state and international policy bodies). So we would like to end by welcoming the critique of O'Sullivan and offering an open invitation to educators and learners to continue this debate according to their own terms of reference.

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