

Exploring Equality through Creative Methods of Learning in Adult Literacy: Findings from a Peace Funded Project

ROB MARK

Introduction

The Literacy and Equality in Irish Society (LEIS) Project is an example of a project which used alternative non-text methodologies to help literacy and basic education learners explore and understand how inequalities in society have impacted on their lives.

The project focused on inequalities, shifting the emphasis in literacy and basic skills practice away from using printed material to encouraging learners and tutors to explore together the experience of using non-text based methods of learning. The particular focus for inspiring this new type of learning was the post-conflict situation in the North of Ireland and the need to understand how including equality issues in literacy learning might contribute to peace building and reconciliation. The project had three key strands – Literacy, Equality, and Creativity and the partnership brought together different types of expertise to research, design and develop a package of innovative text-free teaching methods that could be used to explore equality issues in adult literacy education.

The LEIS Project was a European Union project funded largely under the Peace and Reconciliation Programme for Northern Ireland and Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland. The key partners were the Equality Studies Centre, University College, Dublin (UCD) and the School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast (QUB). The project was also supported by other non-funded partners including the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Dublin and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) in Belfast.

The project explored five different text-free methods and these methods were piloted with adult literacy tutors and tutor-trainers in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic. The Project developed a Resource Guide for Adult Learners and this Guide, together with the full text of the project evaluation report can be found on the web page www.leis.ac.uk

What ideas influenced LEIS?

The project held as one of its core principles the belief that adult literacy and basic education is an equality issue, and that low levels of literacy is a manifestation or symptom of inequality. This project set out to develop clearer links between the theoretical concept of equality and the practical approaches to teaching literacy. The linkages were created through the development of creative and non-text methodologies which literacy tutors could use in their practice. The methods selected were – Visual Arts, Drama, Storytelling, Image Theatre, and Making Music (Lamb, Mark, Murphy and Sorake, 2006).

A set of innovative methodologies were developed that could create spaces for the exploration of equality issues for tutors to use within adult literacy education. These methodologies were intended to empower both tutors and learners to engage with key equality issues of relevance to the lives of literacy learners. In view of the cross-border, peace and reconciliation focus of the project, it was intended that inequalities stemming from the experience of conflict within Northern Ireland and the border counties, would be included in this engagement.

In general, literacy definitions reflect the ideological perspectives of their creators as well as the social, cultural, political and economic environment of the time, making it almost impossible to find a definition that suits everybody. As society evolves, the multiple literacies required in order to make sense of our environment are constantly growing and changing. Some literacy definitions focus on a standard set of measurable generic skills while others tend to be more rooted in the context of people's lives. Definitions are also reflected in the services provided, with a very different kind of adult literacy education coming from a definition that focuses exclusively on technical skills, to the kind of education following on from a more holistic definition of literacy.

Clearly, there is a range of different approaches in relation to how literacy can be understood and defined. The LEIS project found that there were many different interpretations of literacy amongst individuals, between communities and in

policies and practices that they examined on both sides of the border. The project held that while it was not necessary to have one agreed understanding of literacy, it was important for literacy tutors to have made their own exploration of the various approaches to understanding literacy, and to reflect on these in order to link theories of literacy and equality with creative methods of learning.

Understanding equality

As in the case of literacy, equality is a complex concept to define and it is challenging to understand how inequality works in practice. Yet for literacy tutors, it is especially important to have an understanding of how inequality in the structures of our society can impact on an individual's life chances. Literacy tutors work with some of the most marginalised groups in society. Unless tutors have some understanding of how society operates to discriminate against and marginalise some individuals, while privileging others, they will not be in a position to facilitate their students in exploring the equality issues in their own lives, a central tenet of this project.

The project used a theoretical framework developed by the Equality Studies Centre at UCD to facilitate a better understanding of inequality (Baker, Lynch and Cantillon, 2004). This theoretical model is underpinned by the belief that there are clear patterns that structure the level of inequality experienced by individuals and groups. This framework identifies five interrelated dimensions of equality and tutors identified changes in all these areas.

- **Respect and recognition** – tutors reported that they had learned to recognise the differences that were important for each student as well as the commonalities of experience that brought people together.
- **Love, care and solidarity** – tutors recognised the important emotional dimension of their work and found that the methodologies enabled them to explore painful issues in creative ways.
- **Resources** – tutors recognised the resource issues that impacted on students such as limited availability of classes at the times and locations that students wanted, and the problems caused by inappropriate accreditation systems but were generally not in positions that enabled them to make changes that would lead to more equality.
- **Power relations** – tutors reported that they had developed a greater understanding of how they could recognise the strengths and expertise of themselves and the students through dialogue. They found that the meth-

odologies had changed the balance of power between tutor and student and student and student because there was less emphasis on the skills of reading and writing and more on the ability to express your views in other ways.

Creative non- text methods, equality and peace building

The methodologies in the project were developed using the framework outlined above. In keeping with the empowerment and inclusive focus of the framework, the approach used involved an inclusive, participatory approach in which tutors and learners were invited to engage as equal partners with the project development team at all stages in the project.

The project saw adult literacy tutors as having a valuable role to play in supporting the process of peace and reconciliation. The project enabled tutors to freely enter into joint programmes to discuss cross-community and inter-community issues in safe spaces through the use of creative methodologies in courses and workshops. The tutor group was itself cross-community (religious, political, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, etc.) and this was an important aspect of the improvement of relationships as people were able to share their diverse backgrounds and opinions.

The project directly promoted peace and reconciliation through the research, development and design of the resource guide and CD as this enabled tutors to develop more equal practice and also enabled students to participate in the debate about what equality means and how it can be enacted. Learners were given space to question previously held assumptions in the area of politics, economics, religion, and culture, consequently empowering them to challenge and question the deep structural inequalities existing in society. The process of peace-building was also enhanced at the individual level through facilitating literacy learners and tutors to explore the inequalities that impact on their lives and the possibilities that exist for change.

Using creative methods in understanding conflict

In the initial phase, staff worked with learners and tutors to explore issues of equality that related to the experience of conflict and identity, and how these experiences can inform the practice of adult literacy education.

The approach to literacy that LEIS took was about changing the arrangements of learning as well as people's perceptions of it because it challenged individu-

ally-based, deficit views of learners and instead focused on people's ability to do what they wanted in their lives. In the words of one tutor 'it opened my eyes and mind to what is possible through using other methods'. In addition, the work of the project was based on the premise that literacy is far more than a set of basic skills, but rather, is a set of social practices. Literacy practices integrate the routines, skills, and understanding that are organised within specific contexts and also the feelings and values that people have about these activities. The use of innovative, non-text based methods was designed to take account of the emotional context for learning for many literacy students who have often experienced failure at school and may have low self-esteem.

Evidence from pilot courses showed that the use of creative non-text methods with both teachers and students had both educational and social benefits. Tutors reported that their understanding of literacy and how it might be acquired had been challenged as a result of their involvement. In addition, they demonstrated that the use of such methods can provide a more inclusive way of learning which is not based on text – based privileged forms of knowing, being and doing.

Tutors used the methodologies in different ways. One tutor working in a rural further education college had used collage as a way of encouraging her students to use pictures to represent their views about their education at school. She felt that this methodology enabled students to think quite deeply about the issues that had affected them without being inhibited by the need to write down their thoughts. Another example is of a tutor in a community development project who used storytelling as a way of having people in this disadvantaged community describe the history of their place through their own family histories. These stories showed the positive networks and understanding of the area and contributed to a reclaiming of the history of the place.

Another tutor, who teaches job skills to a group of young men, as part of an access to employment course, took along a sculpture she had made to discuss it with this group. She found that it was a good stimulus to discussion as she was sharing her feelings and thoughts with the group in a very open way. Having a concrete object made it easier to bring up more complex issues to do with equality that were generally hard to do in other types of discussion. It was a good stimulus to get the group thinking, rather than asking the group to write their thoughts down, which wouldn't have worked at all and would have limited their thinking to what they knew how to write.

The methods also enabled tutors to develop new skills and created greater levels of co-operation and understanding between literacy tutors in both parts of Ireland.

One tutor noted:

‘I found working with tutors from the south made me look at my own practices more openly because what I had taken for granted about accrediting learners was different for them. It was a bit uncomfortable to have the things I see as common sense challenged but it did improve my practices.’

Some of the tutors also expressed their criticism of the use of creative methodologies. Some felt the activities might require a high level of preparation or be perceived as ‘childish’ by learners, while others questioned the value of activities having so much fun. For some tutors and learners, education may be perceived as a serious activity where it is not always easy to equate learning as synonymous with a high level of enjoyment. While tutors were very enthusiastic about the use of creative methods for exploring equality issues, they also indicated that ongoing advice and support might be needed to enable tutors to introduce creative methodologies into their practices. They indicated that such advice and support would help build tutors’ confidence in their abilities to use the methodologies. They also spoke of the need for a clear rationale to validate the learning in the eyes of managers and funding bodies. These comments showed that while tutors were enthusiastic about the new methodologies, they were also aware of the limitations many of which were practical, but which could nevertheless be important in determining success.

Conclusion

By focusing on equality and creativity, the LEIS project has shown how these concepts can be used to develop new skills and understanding for adult literacy and basic education learners using non-text methodologies. This, in turn, can empower learners to examine and understand inequalities affecting their own lives and the lives of others, and the underlying causes of these inequalities. It might, for example, include the social, economic, cultural or environmental domains.

However, an understanding of such issues will not on its own provide a panacea for overcoming inequalities. Such changes often require commitment from others including those responsible for the allocation of resources and those with

political influence to bring about change. This lies largely outside the control of the individual. However, at the very least, an understanding of equality might be said to provide learners with new skills and knowledge which can bring about real changes in their lives.

Rob Mark is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, Queen's University Belfast and is currently Co-ordinator of Lifelong Learning.

References

- Baker, J., Lynch, K., & Cantillon, S. (2004). *Equality from Theory to Action*. Dublin: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lamb, T., Mark, R., Murphy, P. & Soroke, B. (Eds.), (2006). *Literacy, Equality & Creativity. Resource Guide for Adult Educators*. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.
- www.leis.ac.uk