Community Education:
Listening to the voices

Brid Connolly

Community education may have had a clear, concise definition at one time, but that definition has been re-worked by the dynamic interpretations that have imbued it as a result of the community education movement, over two decades. This article tries to capture some of those new meanings and to raise some issues for exploration. It cannot do justice to the entire scope of the field but it will consider three broad areas in relation to these trends. Firstly, it takes a brief look at the growth and development of community education in Ireland. Secondly, it explores the impact of community education on learning in a post-modern knowledge based society. Finally, it traces the role it has played in the emergence of communitarianism as a social movement in Ireland.

This article is sub-titled 'listening to the voices'. Voices have been crucial in the growth and development of community education in Ireland. Community education provided a forum for listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people, it developed a process which valued the stories and enabled the participants to interrogate their own words. In addition, community education has supplied the wherewithal for disparate groups to engage with empowering processes and become active agents in their communities. Women as a group have moulded community education, but, in doing so, they have advocated a model which has been adapted by others, to address particular social issues and disadvantage. These groups include marginal men, Travellers, people with disability, people with addictions, and homelessness, among others. Community education is a flexible, emancipating process, which enables people to become more agentic in their own lives, and to bring about change in their worlds.

Growth and Development

Community education has been created in that most dynamic of processes, that of generating knowledge by action and reflection. It was formed by people who wanted different ways of taking their place in the world. The influences in the early days of women's community education were multi-layered, as I perceive it. Ireland did not have the full legacy of workers education that characterised British and Northern Ireland's Workers Education Association. There were many very interesting initiatives in the world of adult education. For example, Adult Education Organisers had been employed from the late 1960s to provide adult education through the Vocational Education Committee system. Some universities and colleges provided Extra Mural Studies, in liberal education, arts and crafts, in vocational training, and so on. All deserve a full historical treatment, which is beyond the ambit of this article, which concentrates on the emergence of community education.

The literature on the sphere is sparse, due, perhaps, to the growth in a non-formal, non-academic, organic way, and this article just skims over the surface of the entire body of work produced over the years. Maria Slowey noted the early days of community education (Slowey, 1985), Bassett, *et al* (1989), made the case for adult education and emancipation, emanating from the work of AONTAS. I did a small study looking at my own experience of women's community education (Connolly, 1989). In the meanwhile, Tom Lovett brought these ideas to bear on his work in Northern Ireland, especially with working class men (Lovett, 1988). *From the Personal to the Political*, (Bassett *et al*, 1991) was published to provide a resource in women's community education. In Britain, Jane Thompson, in *Adult Education for a Change* (1980) and *Liberating Learning* (1983) proposed adult education to women and other subordinate groups, as a means in overcoming oppression. More recently, there have been many studies on community education: for example, Johanna McMinn's PhD thesis (2000); the evaluation of the impact of community education on poverty (WERRC, 2001); on men's experiences (Owens, 2000); on gender and learning (King, *et al*, 2003), and on feminist models of community education and lifelong learning (WERRC, 2003). However, community education has its roots in literacy initiatives also.

The high levels of literacy difficulties in Ireland have only recently been acknowledged as a result of the OECD report (OECD, 1997). However, the National Adult Literacy Association had been developing creative approaches to literacy education, and it is clear that Paulo Freire's work, *The Pedagogy of*

the Oppressed (1972) was highly influential, arising from literacy education in Latin America. Freire's ideas became more widely known in community work, and in adult education. Two strands underpinned Freire's philosophy: liberation theology and Marxism. Many of those who were working in these areas at that time, were closely associated with the Roman Catholic Church, and this was congruent with their social justice agenda.

Simultaneously, community education groups began to emerge, linking with some universities, and tutors and facilitators from the literacy, adult education and the counselling worlds. In many ways, the community education groups challenged the existing provision. As women comprised most of the adult learners availing of this provision, they found that it was not always suitable. Community education groups were mainly composed of women working inside the home and they set up their own programmes, with childcare as a basic condition. There were no classes without childcare.

A number of very interesting courses were designed and delivered in these new models. Many of them were premised on the social changes that occurred as a result of the women's movement and other social changes. The derogatory term 'unmarried mother' lost its judgmental sting with learning programmes designed to help mothers who found themselves as, or chose to be, lone parents. Women's Studies was, and still is, an interdisciplinary area of study, bringing with it the learning from the political movement, was offered at Certificate level in the early 1980s. Social and Human Studies, Creative Writing, Parenting, Personal Development, Assertiveness Skills, were all offered in these community education groups. Thompson coined the phrase 'really useful knowledge' to articulate how these programmes provided knowledge and insight for political and critical awareness (Thompson, 1996). There were around 1,000 groups running programmes in community education, in response to high levels of disadvantage, poverty and neglect, the brunt of which was borne by women (AONTAS, 2000).

Community education evolved with this complex, dynamic interaction of:

- grass roots organic growth
- ownership of the process by the participants
- the person-centred approach tutors developed in literacy education
- learners participate freely
- the centrality of the subjective experience of the participants

- location within and of the community
- feminist education, which is very complex in itself, but incorporating consciousness raising and gender awareness
- emancipatory education proposed by Freire (1972) incorporating praxis and conscientization
- Jane Thompson's 'really useful knowledge, (Thompson, 1996)
- the potential for societal transformation.

This evolution became central in all the education programmes, in pedagogical terms and in content terms. These are the themes I want to look at in the next section.

Impact of community education on learning

Community education is a transactional, dynamic process which is pluralistic, broad, energising, and subjective. Learning communities demonstrate how learning is not just an individual acquisition of knowledge, nor that learning can only take place in the classroom. Groups are integral to the notion of community education and group processes underpin the vitality of the arena. The key impact on learning emanating from community education and incorporated into the literature on adult education is group-based learning. Some of the influences are from the therapeutic world, especially in the adopting of the person-centred approach, first introduced in humanistic psychotherapy (Rogers, 1967). However feminist analyses uncovered the shortfalls in this model, in particular in the location of power, and moving from the personal to the social (Connolly, 1999). However, a person-centred approach is vital, provided that it is bounded by critical understanding of the person, and especially when it enables participants to create their own knowledge and value systems, as a tool in creating their worlds.

Facilitation skills emerged as key methods for enabling groups to meet their need to create their own knowledge and value system. Facilitators start from participants' own starting points, and enable students to engage with their experience critically. I contested the view that critical thinking is a cognitive process, and therefore cannot take into account the affective part of learning. I distinguished awareness and consciousness. As I understand it, self-awareness is basic emotional intelligence, where we develop the intimate knowledge of our emotional states. Self-awareness is prior to consciousness, which I perceive to have a social, as well as personal dimension. Freire's concept of conscientization, and the women's movement consciousness raising are experiential

processes and therefore more suitable to the emancipatory potential of adult education (Connolly, 1996). Self-directed learning is fundamental to facilitation, where, instead of the teacher controlling the syllabus, the participants control the process, identifying their own learning needs. The role of the facilitator is to create the critical environment and to provide expertise in the subject or topic. The facilitators' knowledge is a resource to the group. Group work is a democratic process, which fosters the equality of facilitators and participants. This is a radical departure from mainstream models of education, in which the distribution of power is uneven and teachers have the authority to exercise power over students in various ways.

Community education values non-formal learning. That is, non-formal learning takes place outside the statutory institutions, it does not have to adhere to prior criteria in relation to evaluation, assessments, and so on, and is, therefore freer to create its own templates. Community education also values informal learning, the kind that takes place during coffee breaks, or learning by doing. Some formal education has taken on board the lessons from these non-formal and informal approaches and incorporated them into their own programmes. However, this is not always welcome, as the appropriation of facets and elements into the formal system has the effect of diminishing the social justice agenda. I will pick up this point later, but I want to acknowledge that community education has stretched the reach of mainstream education, especially in the recognition of informal learning.

The key achievement of community education is the way in which those most closely involved have shaped it. I believe this idea would not be viable in any other sector. The notion that school children and traditional might have a say in what they want to learn, and how, and where, would have fierce opposition in the educational institutions. Yet, of all the initiatives in education over the recent decades, community education has been the one which has most potential for growth and development. It remains creative, flexible, dynamic, transactional and challenging. In particular, it has fostered the community and social dimension of learning, and brought with it a code of ethics, a core set of values for post-modern Ireland.

Emergence of communitarianism

The concept of communitatianism has been developed over the past 20 years or so (Bell, 1993). The model of responsibility to and for one another is central

to the concept and it proposes a code of ethics based on this responsibility, rather than, for example, religious morality. It encompasses the rights based codes of liberal humanism, but goes beyond them, in attempting to build active citizenship, social obligation and self-reliance. In Ireland we have seen community responses to many of the issues in society which have emerged as the outcome of the state's inability to address or to cope with difficulties inherent in modern society (Ó'Cinnéide and Walsh, 1990). It is an alternative to the harshness of individualism and it fosters self-expression and self-determination.

Community development has been a very powerful agent in raising issues around social and cultural inequality, such as poverty, discrimination, neglect and other disadvantages. Community development essentially entails members of a community – geographical or issue-based – identifying their needs in terms of development, sustainability and education, and collectively working together to meet those needs. Community education is an agent of community development and they have core attributes in common (AONTAS, 2000). Community Action Network and the Combat Poverty Agency have stressed that collective action, entailed in the process, challenges the status quo. However Ó'Cinnéide and Walsh are pessimistic with regard to the capacity of powerless, disadvantaged groups to bring about fundamental social change (1990).

The community education movement has made inroads in mainstream education and in asserting itself as a force in Irish society (DES, 2000). This connects with the point I want to pick up from the preceding section. Community education is often proposed as a means to reach marginal groups because of its success with developing relationships with people who are often silenced. However, this can be an inappropriate use of the learning from the sphere. I have referred elsewhere to this as 'the glass fence'. By this, I am trying to articulate the way in which community education is contained by depriving it of resources, while seeming to value it. In the meantime, the methods and skills of community education are appropriated for statutory agencies, such as employment and training bodies, and people are forced to attend. The glass fence acts like the glass ceiling: people can see through it, but cannot break through it. Practitioners and participants are safely fenced off, while their valuable knowledge is used to get to people who haven't necessarily opted for it. The fundamental condition for community education, the grassroots movement, where participants identify and self-direct their own learning stories, is

completely missing when people are forced to attend. Yet, looking in on any of these compulsory courses the pedagogy seems to be the same, the content may be similar, the environment may be very conducive, yet it is not community education. It is a top-down, compulsory imposition on people who have very little social power.

So, what is Community Education?

In discussions about the nature of community education, there is one aspect that most people are agreed on. Community education is complex. It is not simply a series of techniques, nor is it about the location; and it is not just about subject matter. The Green Paper (1998) and The White Paper on adult education considered community in ideological terms:

> 'a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level. …it is an interactive, challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in term of its methodologies and decision making processes.' (DES, 2000: 110)

That is, an essential component of community education is its political dimension, in the desire to bring about structural change.

> 'Community Education is a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community, and of the community, reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation within the community.' (AONTAS, 2000:6)

Community Education has a number of defining characteristics identified in AONTAS Policy Series:

> 'Community education provides a learning environment, identified and located within the community, not just the physical community, but also the community of shared experiences. Community education groups retain control of the decision-making processes. The processes are rooted in emancipatory, person-centred values. The starting point of community education is the lived experience of the participants, and their critical reflection of it. Community education has a two-fold, interconnected aim for the participants:

- the personal acquisition of skills, knowledge and development of potential
- social and community transformation and empowerment.'
(AONTAS, 2000: 7)

The White Paper emphasises the non-statutory nature of community education, the focus on providing supports for successful learning, particularly guidance, mentoring, feedback and dialogue and, of course, childcare. It has a flexible, problem-solving approach, and it promotes participative democracy, seeing community education has a key role in the transformation of society. (DES, 2000: 113)

Community education takes place in groups, with group based learning methods at the core of its activities. Participants within the groups learn from one another, and engage with their experiences in a critical way in this process. In addition, group work models participative democracy and enables people to make the connection between the personal and the social (Connolly, 1996).

The defining characteristics of community education highlight a number of issues, which sometimes gets in the way of looking at the role of education in society (Lynch, 1989). Firstly, the characteristics show, without question, that learning and education are not simply psychological processes. The focus on learning styles, on multiple intelligences, on differences in the classroom and so on, shows that there is a belief that learning is an individual acquisition, a belief that individual psychological make-up is the essential factor in education and in subsequent benefits or disadvantages. This, in turn, supports the meritocratic system in schooling and it completely denies the social dimensions of education and learning. The social relationships that constitute society are of paramount importance in community education, and while it is able to respond to individual learning needs within the overall framework, it does not retain it in the individual. The personal is on a continuum with social and cultural.

Self-actualisation, a concept central to person-centred education, emanating from Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1999), is not just about reaching one's potential at the expense of others in the learning group. Self-actualising in community education recognises the social nature of the human being and that becoming more fully human necessarily entails interaction, interdependence and dialogue with others. Self-actualisation not a selfish, individualistic goal: it connects with empowerment and emancipation.

Secondly, community education is not about training or up-skilling the labour force. While the outcomes may include the entry of people into the workplace, it is as critical citizens, rather than workers or consumers/customers. Many people have accessed jobs or further education, as a result of participating in community education, but it is a mistake to believe that a new labour force of hitherto hard to reach groups can be an explicit aim of community education. Community education serves the ideal of a more equal society. The economy is part of society, self-evidently, but work and employment are not the only indicators of participation and inclusion. Community education interrogates the values of consumer choice versus active citizenship.

Community education does not include all daytime education, adult education and training. Many community groups started out with the ideological agenda of structural change, but they lost the ideological dimension along the way. I discussed this more fully in Ryan and Connolly (2000), but the point I want to make here is that, while resisting the absolute and definitive definition of community education, it is clear that the ideological aspects are paramount. People describe personal change in very profound terms, but they may ignore structural inequality, perceiving no connection between the social and the personal. Linda Connolly has discussed this very fully, looking in particular at organisations which have educational programmes, but which focus on personal fulfilment and modernisation (Connolly, 2002).

This brings me to the final point in relation to the social agenda of community education. Adult education has been loaded with many agendas, from furthering the work of the Roman Catholic Church to modernising farming methods. When people engage with new ideas, they are naturally energised and enthused. However, it does not mean that they will be emancipated. Without critical analysis, it is likely that they will become more deeply embedded with the prevailing mores.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to combine the voices from many quarters to convey the sense of the concerted evolution which has created community education. I have looked at it from three broad vantage points, that of the essential influences in the development of community education, the impact on education provision and the part it plays in community development. I have tried to

show the complexity and fluidity of the area and to indicate the potential of community education to radically enhance the lives of those who participate in it; learners, tutors, programme co-ordinators, students and article writers. I consider that there are many instances of adult education which fall very short of being community education and it needs to be protected from inappropriate application and implementation. In particular, it behoves us who are very committed to community education to be mindful of the glass fence and to ensure that we are not trapped behind it.

Brid Connolly has been involved in adult and community education for nearly 20 years. She currently works in NUI Maynooth. Her research interests include community education, community arts, gender and social analysis.

References

AONTAS, 2000, *Community Education Policy Series*, AONTAS, Dublin

AONTAS Women's Education Group: Bassett, M., McDonnell, E., McMinn, J., Martin, M, Ryan, A., Rynne, M., 1991, *From the Personal to the Political*, Attic Press, Dublin.

Bassett, M., Brady, B., Fleming, T. and Inglis, T., 1989, For Adults Only: A case for adult education in Ireland, AONTAS, Dublin.

Connolly, Linda, 2002, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.

Connolly, B., 1999, 'Group work and facilitation: a feminist evaluation in their role in transformative adult and community education' in Connolly, B., and Ryan, A. B., *Women and Education in Ireland*, MACE, Maynooth.

Connolly, B., 1997, 'Women in Community Education and Development: Liberation or Domestication?' in Byrne, A., and Leonard, M., (eds.) *Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader*, Beyond the Pale Publications, Belfast.

Connolly, B., 1996, 'Community Development and Adult Education: Prospects for Change?' in Connolly, B., Fleming, T., McCormack, D., and Ryan, A., (eds.) *Radical Learning for Liberation*, Mace, Maynooth.

Connolly, B., 1989, *Women's Studies in Lucan Daytime Classes 1985-1989: An evaluation*, (Unpublished thesis)

Department of Education and Science 1998, *Green Paper on Adult Education: Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*, Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science 2000, *White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life*, Dublin, Stationery Office.

Freire, Paulo 1972, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin, London.

King, Peader, O'Driscoll, S., and Holden, S., 2003, Gender and Learning, AONTAS, Dublin.

Lynch, K, 1989 *The Hidden Curriculum: Reproduction in Education*, The Falmer Press, London.

McMinn, J.,. 2000, *The Changes and the Changed: An analysis of women's community education*, UCD, Dublin, (Unpublished PhD Thesis)

Maslow, Abraham H. 1999, *Toward a psychology of being* (3rd ed) J. Wiley & Sons, New York

Ó'Cinneide, S., and Walsh, J., 1990, 'Multiplication and division: trends in community development since the 1960s' in *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 4.

OECD, 1997, 'Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society', in *International Adult Literacy Survey*, Paris, OECD.

Owens, T., 2000, *Men on the Move: A study of barriers to Male Participation in Education and Training Initiatives*, AONTAS, Dublin.

Ryan, A. B., and Connolly, B., 2000, 'Women's community education in Ireland: the need for new directions towards "really useful knowledge"', in Thompson, J., (ed) *Stretching the Academy: The politics and practice of widening participation in Higher Education*, NIACE, Leicester

Slowey, M., 1987, 'Education for Domestication or Liberation? women's involvement in adult education' in Cullen, M.,(ed) *Girls Don't do Honours*, WEB, Dublin.

Thompson, J. L., 1997, " 'Really Useful Knowledge'": Linking Theory and Practice' in Connolly, B., Fleming, T., McCormack, D., and Ryan, A., (eds.) *Radical Learning for Liberation*, MACE, Maynooth.

Thompson, Jane L., (ed), 1983, *Learning liberation: women's response to men's education*, Croom Helm, London.

Thompson, Jane L., (ed), 1980, *Adult education for a change* Hutchinson, London.

WERRC, 2003, *A Whole New World: A feminist model of community and lifelong learning*, WERRC, Dublin.

WERRC, 2001, *At the Forefront: The Role of Women's Community Education in Combating Poverty and Disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland*, AONTAS and WERRC, Dublin.