

Adult education in times of crises: from Trojan Horses to New Ethics

By Dr Brid Connolly NUI Maynooth

This article is part of a broader debate initiated by the EAEA (European Association for the Education of Adults) about this subject. For more information visit www.eaea.org.

The Story

As the people of Cyprus endure the pain of the failures of the banks, it seems as if Europe has learned nothing from the earlier crises faced by Ireland, Portugal and Spain. That is, the banking sector is out of control, with the free-flow of Euros from Europe, but unregulated or 'light touch' regulation, manipulated by the bonus culture and unwarranted belief in law of the free market. In each case, private debt, prompted, at least in part, by greed, has been replaced by public debt, and the victims are not perpetrators of the crises but the ordinary citizens who are now at their mercy. It must be time to take stock, to look at the underlying causes of the crisis, to get to the deep analysis of the factors involved, and to ensure that we learn for future action.

Ireland is particularly exemplary when we look at the European-wide crisis. Prior to 2008, Ireland was considered a very rich country, the second richest in the world. However, wealth did not trickle down throughout the populations. Indeed, at the height of the wealth, poverty was still a persistent, intractable social problem, and inequality was endemic. Thus, when money and resources were plentiful, they were not used to redress inequality in any meaningful or sustainable way.

However, during the wealthy period, civil society was quite well organised in the work for equality and social justice. Community development projects thrived, especially in urban and suburban areas that were bereft of services, providing child and elder-care, after-schools clubs, and indeed, spearheading regeneration in locations that were neglected or abandoned by the state. Agencies in support of refugee and asylum seekers, human rights, drug and substance addicts, and many other groups, also flourished during this time, with the aim of making fundamental changes in the law and governance in the treatment of marginalised peoples. Adult and community education was integral to many of these initiatives. It was a growthful time for adult education. It was appreciated for its responsiveness and relevance.

When the recession detonated in 2008, the most immediate governmental actions were in these areas of civil society, notwithstanding that the causes of the recession were squarely located in the banking sector, which fuelled a housing bubble. Thus, within a very short time, migrant integration agencies, equality agencies, combat poverty agencies, community development projects and adult education services were cut back ruthlessly, along with the usual public expenditure targets:



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social welfare, education and health provision. That is, while public spending was targeted, the recession was used as a Trojan Horse to attack the progress made in civil society in the work towards equality. The work that had focused in the re-distribution of resources was the first to experience austerity. Adult education must re-appraise its position in order to prevent such devastation in the future.

The position of adult education

The position of adult education in the times of crisis has to continue to be responsive and flexible. The first responsibility is to the learners, individually and collectively. Adult learners come from the full spectrum of society, and with unemployment and few resources, a new cohort is poised to return to education, to facilitate their development. This cohort can particularly benefit from Return to Work and Return to Education initiatives, which target job-seekers,

and perhaps for the first time, many young people are enjoying education and learning with the person-centred and respectful practices of adult educators.

These programmes have a number of advantages. Firstly, they provide investment for the exchequer funding, rather than spend it. That is, the funding reaps rewards for the exchequer, as well as the individual learner, as learning is never wasted. To observe the experience of young people enjoying the process of learning and development is one of the pleasures of my life.

Secondly, return to learning programmes open new possibilities for learners, and help them to understand that their horizons are much wider than they thought. That is, they learn new skills in an atmosphere of respect and esteem, in a participative and discursive process, which is exemplary to adult education.

Finally, these programmes have both long and short term outcomes, as they immediately respond to the needs of the learners, and build their capacity for lifelong learning. This is a quality that enhances the learners' own lives and also their lives of their children and grandchildren. It is the foundation for the learning society.

The implications for adult educators and providers are profound. Adult educators are a collective force, and can influence the philosophy and policy in the field. We must defend the priorities of the learners rather than passively accepting the conditions of the funders. We must continue to develop ourselves, to develop our skills and knowledge

to strengthen the field, rather than allow it to be subsumed into the prevailing neo-liberal discourses widespread in Europe.

The main work of adult educators is to provide alternative analysis of the inequality that emanates from the neo-liberal discourses. This is the only way to ensure that nobody is left behind. The key analysis must focus on the cost of inequality, with a particular critique of the 'trickle down' policy that holds that if the free market is allowed to create wealth for some people, it will eventually benefit the entire community. This is patently false in the case of Ireland, and it can be obviously seen in Spain, Portugal and most of all, Greece, where the poorest suffer in an unprecedented way, while the wealthy are relatively unaffected.

The key way in which adult educators improve their own skills and knowledge is through their own lifelong learning, particularly in researching the field to build the evidence around the value of adult learning. It brings the job into the academy.

Engaging with academia

In my role as an academic, I can see the part that the academy can play in strengthening the field of adult education. Adult educators are in a prime position to critique the role of education as a social institution, in perpetuating inequality and social reproduction. From this position, adult educators can use their research to examine, explore and analyse the experience of adult learners, adult education curriculum development, adult education methodologies and processes, and of course, adult education ethics.

It is through research that the evidence can be presented that adult education has a unique contribution to make to the fabric of society.

Adult education is the most innovative of all teaching and learning developments. While Dewey, Froebel, Montessori, predominate in mainstream education, adult educators call on the learning from feminist education, popular education, critical pedagogy, praxis and social analysis to underpin the practice. The practice is democratic and dialogical, and subverts the power dynamics between the learners and teachers. It is the model for the kind of society that we want for all our citizens. It is a profoundly ethical approach, and it fundamentally examines the role of education in bringing about a more just and equal society.

Finally

In my almost thirty years in adult and community education, I have worked with a wide spectrum of the population, from people with disabilities, to new Irish citizens. In my current work as an educator of adult and further educators, I see the work with young people, especially early school leavers, unemployed people, people with literacy difficulties, Travellers, women in domestic violence contexts, people working to address climate change, and in many other areas. Adult education is at the heart of the real life, the reality on the ground of many people's lives. This is where it belongs, and from where it can continue to exert itself, through thinking, research, praxis and commitment, to make a difference, to create a new world for a new era.