

The Awful Truth and Budgies: What Liberation is offered by Learning?

Dr. Ted Fleming
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Introduction

Education for Liberation is an ambitious title for a conference and a remarkable concept for those in a place that is defined as not free. Education for Liberation could mean education for release, as that is often seen as liberation. But of course that is not exactly what is meant in the conference title. Liberation is a complicated idea and I am reminded of Umberto Eco's comment (1990) on 'Disneyland'. He said that the unreality of society is hidden from our view by creating an experience where unreality is heightened. Behind the spectacle, the façade hides all the tricks of capitalism, with a new twist. Toy houses are fronts for shops.

In this way the unreal quality of everyday experience is made invisible to us. In the same way the injustices of society, the oppressions and absence of freedom are heightened in prison so that we can harbour the illusion that there is freedom outside prison. I must be free because I am on the outside. We might ask how much freedom do we really have?

In these moments I am going to try to tease out in a very preliminary way how adult education might be of some use to us in reframing an understanding of learning that is liberating for prisoners.

In order not to appear naïve or innocent it is worth stating a number of things. There are realities that we want to remind ourselves of as we commence this conference so that we can keep in the forefront of our consciousness some Awful Truths.

In Ireland's 17 prisons there are approximately 3,000 prisoners. A significant number have no literacy skills and many have limited literacy. Only 7 per cent stayed in school beyond 16 years. More than 30 per cent had no schooling or only primary. Over 50 per cent had some secondary schooling which only 16 per cent completed (Morgan & Kett, 2003, p. 20). There is an unusual degree of personal disruption in their family backgrounds. There is evidence of 'a range of social, economic and educational disadvantages that interact in ways that predispose young people towards crime' (Morgan & Kett, 2003, p. 21).

Prisoners have done terrible things in families, in communities, on the streets of our society. Prisoners are mostly male, young, from disadvantaged backgrounds and with low levels of education. They arrive in jail having spent a life time of unfreedom. This is part of the Awful Truth we know already.

Other truths we also know. Our record in child-care in many countries has been shameful. In Ireland anyone under 18 years of age is a child (Childrens Act, 1997, sec 8). Are there children in our jails? If they are under 18 they are children. Is it true that St. Patrick's Institution uses solitary confinement for children? Do children in jail, who are in the care of the state, have the same rights to care plans and social workers

and to a safe and caring place? Do the staff dealing with these children have child care qualifications? Are the responses to the behaviour of these children violent on occasion?

Quoting Peter McVerry (2006, p. 4);

St Patrick's Institution is nothing but a 'warehouse' for young people many of whom were broken by their childhood experiences. In this harsh and punitive system they are further broken down...St Patrick's is a demoralising, destructive and dehumanising experience, with no redeeming features; it is characterised by idleness and boredom for young people who are full of energy, at a crucial time in their development.

Is this not the Awful Truth? In our society we know this and live as if we did not know it. Anything we want to say about liberation must deal with this awful truth. Of course, one of the aims of the IPEA is to support penal reform.

Well we may agree so far?

There has been a continuous record of support for adult education as a humanising influence in Irish prisons and historically prison education staff has been key in the development of adult education in Ireland. The Annual Report of the Inspector of Prisons has chosen to highlight the work of the education provision.

Recently, the prison authorities in Ireland announced that two budgies were found in Portlaoise Prison (Gartland, 2007, p. 1). I'm going to controversially suggest that **this is good news**. I want to suggest that I have good reason for saying this. Budgies may be declarations of humanity, assertions of the ability to care in a system that does not.

One more set of preliminary comments:

In furthering the themes already outlined I want to say that in any discussion in our society it is not politically correct to blame parents for any problems we have with children. In particular we cannot blame mothers.

But in our society it is acceptable to blame children – or at least locate problems in the child or young person. What am I suggesting? When a young person behaves in a way that is challenging, in school or in the community we increasingly bring the young person to a counsellor, a therapist or have them seen by a psychiatrist, on occasion prescribe drugs, e.g. Ritalin, or they are sent to jail.

I'm suggesting that neither parent nor child should be blamed and in this conversation I want to attempt to locate the problem, not in either the parent or child, but in a relationship between the child and the adult world. And who will be our allies in this?

The experience that so many prisoners had of the system is a heightened version of the experience of so many. There are stories in our own culture that remind us of a society and history from which we are all emerging. I recall Frank McCourt's (1997) story from *Angela's Ashes* of the schoolmaster Mr Benson who took a boy aside and beat him in a cruel and vicious way merely for asking questions. The boy was called

‘Question Quigley’ because of his tendency to ask questions and as a result of the beatings he was made to say; “I’m sorry I asked the question. I’ll never ask a question again, Sir” (McCourt, 1997, p. 131).

I call this a ‘shut-up’ story. There are so many stories in people’s history: Imagine the number of story titles you might know about: Get out of the house stories; you are no good stories; you will never be any good stories; you are bad stories; you are like your father stories, etc.

The challenge for educators and in this case for prison educators is to find other stories, to help prisons ‘unlock’ more positive stories that act as counter stories and opposite stories to these ‘shut-up stories. Stories that liberate. To create stories so that people may later recall them as spaces of freedom.

What might we call these stories that are opposite to ‘shut-up stories’?

In his *Memoirs* (2005) John McGahern tells of having survived a childhood of love and hatred in rural Ireland.

McGahern opens his *Memoirs* talking about the “inch deep” soil of Leitrim where one can trace “the beaten path the otter takes between the lakes” and the “quiet places on the edge of the lakes...where the otter feeds and trains her young” (2005, p. 1). On the final page he returns to the otter, and also talks about his mother, who died when he was eight, saying:

She never really left us. In the worst years, I believe we would have been broken but for the different life we had known with her and the love she gave that was there like hidden strength.

When I reflect on those rare moments when I stumble without warning into that extraordinary sense of security, that deep peace, I know that consciously and unconsciously she has been with me all my life.

If we could walk together through those summer lanes, with their banks of wild flowers that ‘cast a spell’, we probably would not be able to speak, though I would want to tell her all the local news.

We would leave the lanes and I would take her by the beaten path the otter takes under the thick hedges between the lakes. At the lakes’ edge I would show her the green lawns speckled with fish bones and blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young....

As we retraced our steps, I would pick for her the wild orchid and the windflower.

(McGahern, 2005, p. 271-272)

I am prompted to ask ‘what was it that he knew?’ McGahern knew something: how his mother forged for him a secure childhood and he carried this security with him at conscious and unconscious levels through his life. This is what he knew about the

importance of connection and how a secure childhood laid down foundations for a lifetime of potential security.

John Bowlby's attachment theory is not a usual source of ideas for this discussion but I am increasingly convinced that the early years of a life are crucial for the formation of a person. Unfortunately, many children's needs are not met and indeed in some instances are frustrated. We now know enough about the early years to suggest that attachments that are frustrated, chaotic or insecure may well (or will) surface in adult lives as disorganised or chaotic internal working models that impact strongly on one's ability to relate and become a mature adult. I remember suggesting to a group of Irish prison educators that in cases where parents were chaotic then the grandparents might be excellent role models and provide important security for the child. But I was informed by prison teachers that for prisoners grandparents were frequently not functioning either.

But at least we can agree that the way children are reared has a profound impact on how they are as adults. In this I am not blaming anyone and an exploration of the causes is another day's work.

Bowlby's attachment operates by each child developing an internal representation of their experience of the world of relationships, that develops into what Bowlby called an **internal working model** of social relating (Bowlby, 1969, p. 80). The internal working model is a model like an architect's model, a representation of how the individual perceives the world of relationships to be and they guide and inform social interactions.

A securely attached child (or adult) will have a set of internal working models, or basic assumptions that see the world as a safe place and themselves as responsive, caring, reliable, and a self that is worthy of love and attention. They will bring this way of making sense of relationships to all their relationships. On the other hand, an insecurely attached child (or adult) is more likely to view the world as a dangerous place, be more cautious towards others and will see themselves as not worthy of attention and love (Holmes, 1993, p 79). The internal working models can be seen as strategies people use for relating with the world and other people. For many of the people in prison their strategies are destructive, angry, violent, aggressive and chaotic. They are thus because they have had experiences that produce these strategies. Shut-up stories produce survival strategies that assist survival in a world that does not care and in many cases abuses and mistreats a child.

In a world where one's need for connection has been frustrated, disappointed and neglected, prison further disconnects. And so budgies may be good news! In a life where one's relationship world of family or community may not be functioning as the young person needs there is the added need for connection to some network of care and support.

But the prison, in removing a young person from this flawed environment further disconnects the individual from networks that might be supportive. The prison system institutionalises the disconnection and cuts the bonds and links with a community, (irrespective of how dysfunctional or chaotic it may be on occasion). Prison may well make this worse at two levels. Firstly, at the psychological level and secondly at the

community level as now the worst possible situation has emerged, the prisoner is isolated and the situation becomes developmentally destructive. Prison is developmentally destructive.

How can education help? The task of education, as always, is greater than the teaching of skills or literacy or sociology or any other discipline. The aim of building resilience in this area may be a hugely developmental contribution. It becomes an educational imperative to counter the disconnections.

But if disconnection and frustrated attachments are at the heart of the young persons experience this is not just the experience of disadvantaged people. It is not only happening in people's minds, not just a psychological experience. Disconnection is the key characteristic of our age according to David Putnam. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2001) built a case for the decline of civil society. The Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, in an interview in *The Irish Times* (Brennock, 2004, p. 1) tells us he is reading *Bowling Alone* which argues that civil society is breaking down as Americans became more disconnected from their families, neighbours, communities, and the country itself. The organisations that gave life to democracy are fraying. Bowling is the metaphor he uses. Years ago thousands of people belonged to bowling leagues, according to Putnam. Today, however, they're more likely to bowl alone. If a similar dynamic is happening in Irish society it could be characterised as 'Going to the Gym Alone.'

Putnam says that Americans are right about the bonds of communities having withered, and this transformation has real costs. Putnam shows how people have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbours and democratic structures - and how we might reconnect. He warns Americans that their stock of "social capital", the very fabric of their connections with each other, has been declining. Putnam describes the resulting impoverishment of lives and communities. Membership in organisations, from the Boy Scouts to political parties and Church, is falling. Ties with friends and relatives are fraying. People are more inclined to watch sport alone rather than with friends.

So the chaos in family relationships produces chaotic strategies for relating to others and world. And in addition if community bonds are being fragmented leading to increasing isolation in society and communities, this is particularly risky for young people and for men especially.

There are, I suspect, a number of reasons why people turn to adult education as a source of ideas for working in prison education. Firstly, adult education provides support for the idea that the learner is an adult, or responds best when treated in an adult way, and education for adults is different to the education of children. Secondly, because adult education takes seriously the fact that school (and indeed other parts of the system world) have failed those in prison. The principles and practices of adult education form a counter position to classroom or school learning and I will return to some of these later. Thirdly, it offers connection, engagement and a developmental possibility.

What has adult education to offer then that makes it the preferred pedagogy in European Public Policy? What does it offer beyond the cookery classes, beyond the

functional literacy, the learning of skills in workshops, the learning that is fundamentally important for getting a job? Of course freedom from unemployment, illiteracy, hunger and poor diet are important freedoms. But liberation implies more, a good deal more.

Instead of quoting Paulo Freire or other critical pedagogy practitioners I want you (as visitors to Ireland) to experience the power of learning that may be liberating. In an attempt to move toward naming them I am reminded of the scene in Brian Friel's play *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) where the women spontaneously break out into dancing. There are few moments like it in theatre. What does this mean? In the play Michael tells his story of a summer in Ballybay in Monaghan with his mother, four aunts and an uncle back from the missions in Africa. He opens the play (Friel, 1990, p. 1) with the invitation to remember:

When I cast my mind back to the summer of 1936 different kinds of memories
Offer themselves to me. We got our first wireless set that summer – well a sort
of set; and it obsessed us.

The play unfolds and tells Michael's story of how his father was more missing than present, when present not keeping promises, his mother and her sisters were in various ways unlucky in love, one lost her job, two left Ballybay and were never heard of again. His uncle, a priest home from the missions, struggles with illness. But in all of this Michael recalls, at the end of the play (Friel, 1990, p.55-56), what he remembers:

And so, when I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936, different kinds of
memories offer themselves to me.

But there is one memory of that Lughnasa time that visits me most often; and
what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact...When I
remember it, I think of it as dancing.

This I hope captures the possibility of dancing in spite of the Awful Truths. The freedom is to dance, to dream, to connect and express how things might be or might be different.

It strikes me that in this we find an opposite story to the shut up story. How can an educational experience be created so that the student later recalls it as dancing? What should be happening in class that hears the student, respects them, allows questions to be asked and explored and openness be supported and encouraged?

But teaching prisoners to 'dance' even in a metaphorical way may be too complicated, not clear enough for the practitioner, the lesson plan, the complexity of facing a small group of adults in a classroom. This is too vague. It is too like Anthony Quinn in *Zorba the Greek*. Teach me to dance he said and the music of Mikis Theodorakis...too complicated.

Ok let's say that it is a much more simple thing - this pedagogy. And so this is why the story about Budgies in Portlaoise prison is good news.

Principles of Adult Education and Prison Education

Let me mention a number of ideas and concepts that have become current as a way of setting an agenda for teaching.

Mind-mindedness

More recent research has developed the concept of 'mind-mindedness' to describe the ability of a parent to understand and respond not only to the infant's feelings but also to their thinking (Meins, et al., 2002). Mind-mindedness is an indicator of a relationship that is more likely to produce secure attachments. Mind-mindedness is a characteristic of a secure attachment.

A carer's 'proclivity to comment appropriately on their child's mental states and processes is related in research to a secure attachment' (Meins, et al. 2001. p. 637). These researchers also found that mothers with secure attachments had developed a propensity to treat their children as individuals with minds. Mind-mindedness reframes Bowlby's and Ainsworth's concept of 'maternal sensitivity' and involves the carer being 'willing to change her focus of attention in response to cues from the infant' (Meins, et al 2001, p. 638). However, as adult educators we do not want to emulate 'maternal sensitivity' but if minding others minds or paying attention to others minds is as significant as this then it might allow us explore the developmental potential of paying attention to the other's mind. It's like becoming a friend of someone else's mind (Greene, 2007). Even the child's early vocalisations were perceived as meaningful to the mind-minded carer. I suggest that the secure child implies that in supporting a secure base for adult learning the same process of mind-mindedness may be important. Mind-mindedness may be a useful way of supporting adults in the process of learning.

One of the characteristics of gifted children (and of secure children, see above) is that their parents held stimulating conversations with them. And if we take our guide from this, and take our guide not from studies of disadvantage, or disability or pathology but from the requirements of a gifted child then it is more imperative that we engage the minds of prisoners in education provision.

The liberation offered may be from isolation to a position where possibly for the first time one is understood. I may bring liberation from violent and aggressive strategies, as in Alice Miller (1987, pp. 169-170).

In looking at the relationship between adult education and the State there is a dilemma. On the one hand the State is responsible for most adult education funding. On the other there is a history of adult education residing in civil society, in that part of the community where the family and voluntary organisations are found. The State has particular difficulty acting in the interests of this community or civil society because, some would say, it has been seduced, maybe corrupted, by the economy to act in its interests. In this way the tendency of the State is to support a vision of lifelong learning and adult education that sustains the economy and values learning that involves job skills and up-skilling. In fact the Government sets as a priority the learning that supports economic development. There is rhetoric of social inclusion and equality but that too has an economic intent.

If we were to operate on the basis that we support the full range of learning that is possible for adults and respond to adults in their complex entirety we would look for learning that is not merely of economic potential (Fleming, 2004).

What is there over and above the economic? What kinds of learnings are possible and usually missing? Adult education can concern itself with the state by promoting second chance, citizen education and equality. Adult education can also concern itself with the economy by teaching job skills, upskilling and indeed functional literacy. However, adult education in civil society concerns itself with learning for family, community and social involvements. Above all it concerns itself with increasing the potential for democratic interactions and making the system world more democratically accountable. Unfortunately, there is conflict between the system world (state and economy) and civil society. Many adult educators and especially those in prison education operate at the uncomfortable interface between the system world and the community.

It is not surprising that the State finds uncomfortable a questioning of their position and critique of their actions. Of course the State will not teach citizens to ask really critical questions about power in society, it will not teach people to protest about injustices or critique or transgress.

What I am proposing is the kind of adult education that speaks to people's highest aspirations; that aims at reaching the full potential of what it is to be an adult and opens the possibility that adults will be able to engage in the most significant kind of learning possible. What I am proposing is against seeing adults merely as workers, against seeing citizens only as consumers and clients; against the idea that hospital waiting lists are the only choice for a highly developed European nation. It questions the relationship between business and politicians and is able to see why it is not the legitimate business of the economic sector to fund political parties. It teaches people to see that, in spite of being told it is not our business to ask where the Taoiseach gets his money, it is our business to ask where he gets his extra cash. It might be bold enough to teach people to look not for rules and laws to say when something is right but to have principles and ideals. It teaches that democracy requires that our leaders are beholden to no individual or group of individuals or sector except the citizens, all the citizens equally. Anything less is corruption. It questions and interrogates the American invasion of Iraq aware of the complex range of political, ideological and economic dimensions of these actions. This learning questions why civil society is the location for so much violence and teaches how to take action against this situation.

In proposing more or a different kind of democracy there are practical concrete aspects to this. In many communities in which adult educators work there are considerable drug problems and associated violent gangs, and people in the areas have learnt to tread carefully. The challenge for community and adult educators is to learn what is appropriate and what is not in such circumstances and be mindful that they do not have to live in the area and have to deal with the consequences.

Adult educators need the best support, training, education and qualifications so that the passion and commitments to a better community and society can be fuelled with ideas and knowledge and the skills required to bring about this goal for everyone. Adult education at its best helps to create spaces in which adults can discuss the kind

of society in which we find ourselves; the kind of society we want to create and learn the skills required to bring about a society that is more just, more fair and where the state and the economy are subject to democratic accountability.

We are capable of dreaming of a different world in which there might be justice, care, freedom and an end to the violations. This learning is social, political, critical and seeks to change systems and institutions that are now operated in the interests of the few so that they operate in the interests of all. (Fleming, 1998).

On the other hand, it does not often enter public discourse that many of the poorer communities in Ireland are held in the very tight grip of violent people. This is reminiscent of work undertaken elsewhere in Dundalk, on the border between Southern and Northern Ireland, where it was found that ‘violence is the “social glue” that maintains control in this community’ (Connolly & Fleming, 1997, p. 26). It is an interesting consequence of a concern for democracy that people might be taught to develop more non-violent ways of interacting.

I’m reminded of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* where Claudia is explaining how she hates Shirley Temple dolls that are a representation of the world of things to be possessed and a reminder of how white dolls are given as presents to black children. She destroyed these dolls:

But I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Had any adult with the power to fulfil my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been ‘Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?’ I could have spoken up, ‘I wanted to sit on a low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.’ The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama’s kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of peach, perhaps, afterwards.

(Morrison, 1990, p. 15)

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