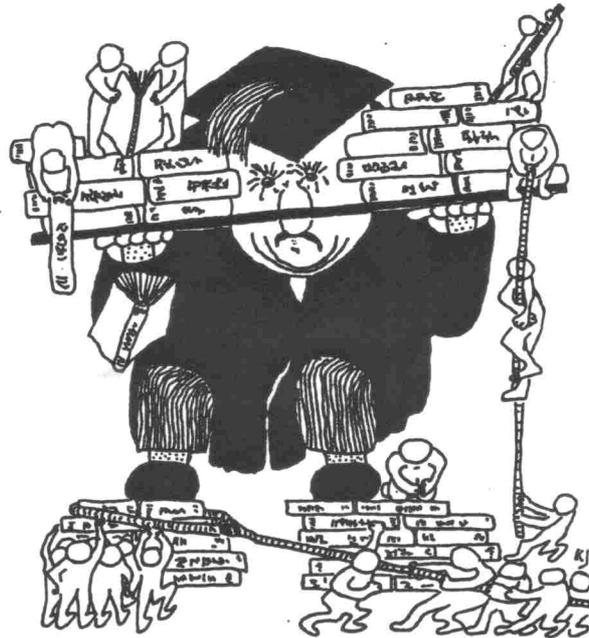


ANNE RYAN and ANN O'BRIEN examine recent developments in access initiatives to higher education for socio-economically disadvantaged students in Ireland. They argue that the dominant liberal approaches to access serve to consolidate existing elitist and exclusionary practices in the processes of knowledge creation and they call for a more comprehensive and radical approach.

Knowledge creation: a challenge for higher education in Ireland



We come to this topic as adult educators. We feel it is important to make this point in order to locate our approach to access within a field of education that has "... the radically democratic development of knowledge at its heart" (Barr, 1999:71). Within this approach promoting access to education across all sectors of the population is of fundamental importance. However, the democratic development of knowledge goes beyond a concern to accommodate a more diverse student body within educational institutions; it also implies providing opportunities for all members of the student body to actively participate in creating the knowledge that is disseminated through these institutions.

The task of democratising knowledge calls for a critique of how knowledge is currently created and disseminated, who is included and who is excluded from these processes, and the extent to which current approaches to access are serving to promote access to these processes.

Education as a force for exclusion

The concern to democratise knowledge is taking place against a backdrop of globalisation. Over the past twenty years globalisation has contributed to a move towards an 'economy-centred' purpose across the

field of education. Korsgaard (1997: 18) attributes this emphasis to the growing influence of the OECD's philosophy which "... is based on a neo-liberal way of thinking, regarding education as an investment in human capital and human resource development". Within this context significant numbers of individuals and communities have found themselves poorly served by education, whether due to their geographic location, or their social, ethnic or cultural status. Their experience of exclusion from education has repercussions in all areas of their lives. They are effectively disconnected from the forces that determine the dominant economic, cultural and political realities across the world.

Ireland's rapid economic growth in the past five years has had a dramatic effect on the living standards of many of the citizens of the state. The so-called 'Celtic Tiger' has bounded onto the world stage increasing employment opportunities for a young highly educated workforce and forging a new confidence in the economic and social climate. The impact of the new prosperity has been rapid and pervasive. Emigration trends, which have been a traditional feature of Irish life, have been reversed to the extent that some service industries have been forced to import labour from other European countries. Property prices in a nation of homeowners are in an

upward spiral and are now the second highest in Europe.

Education is the gatekeeper to this new-found prosperity. In the Ireland of today, tertiary education is seen as the key to labour market success. Since the education reforms of the 1960's the numbers participating in higher education have been steadily increasing - between 1960 and 1980 new building programmes were undertaken in all third-level institutions to cater for the greatly expanded student population which increased by about 60% (Coolahan, 1994: 134, 136). Factors such as the Local Authority Higher Education Grant Scheme and the abolition of third-level fees in 1995 have increased participation in general but have not filtered through to students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds.

While many of the Celtic Tiger's kittens have thrived, a significant section of society has been less well served. It has been estimated that the Irish Education system is highly effective for approximately 80% of the population. Addressing the needs of the remaining 20% poses a challenge. Those who are excluded include those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, mature students, Travellers, ethnic minorities, students with disabilities and women students of non-traditional areas. In a review of education policy in Ireland, Clancy (1999: 91) makes the point that the social

class background of parents is directly related to early school leaving and that among those who complete second level schooling "...the levels of attainment are strongly related to social background, with higher levels of attainment for those from higher socio-economic groups". This is not unique to Ireland. The link between socio-economic status and retention and performance rates are apparent across all OECD countries. Even where there is an increase in the numbers of participants from lower socio-economic groups the gap in relative retention and achievement rates is not closing. A recent OECD study indicates that "...increased overall rates of participation of young adults does not necessarily mean that students from previously under-represented groups have increased their share" (Wagner, 1999:4).

A 1996 review of access programmes (Lynch and O'Riordain) included the perspectives of the key players such as low-income working class students attending college and those in the Leaving Certificate classes at Post Primary school, and the views of teachers, parents and community workers who are working and living within marginalised working class areas. Their study identified three crucial constraints on working class students:

1. Economic constraints which are independent of education in terms of origin, but which impact directly on educational decisions.

2. Institutional constraints specific to the education system itself and arising from the nature of schooling and the way in which the formal education system is organised

3. Cultural constraints which arise due to conflicts in cultural practices between the lifeworld of the students and the organisational culture of schools as social institutions.

The authors noted "...that all four groups (students, teachers, parents and community workers) regarded economic barriers as the over-riding obstacle to equality of opportunity defined in terms of equality of access and participation" (Lynch and O'Riordain 1998, p.454).

These economic barriers are compounded by a series of inter-related social, cultural and educational obstacles. Community activists believed that working class culture was not valued in schools or elsewhere in society as evidenced in the middle class culture of the school, low teacher expectations and the quality of schooling in terms of curriculum and subject choice. Teachers identified a 'cultural deficit' among students from disadvantaged backgrounds due to the fact that many parents have a negative experience of the education system. Lack of information about how the education system works and about life at third-level institutions in general was

identified as another barrier leading to a fear of isolation among second level students and a sense of alienation from such institutions. At post entry level, working class students identified as very important the role of lecturers and support as they came from families with little previous experience of tertiary level. The quality of educational facilities within colleges and the lack of resources in schools were other issues.

The Tertiary response

The White Paper on Education Charting our Education Future (1995) made clear recommendations with regard to how third-level institutions might begin to tackle the problem of unequal access. The Paper states that each tertiary institution will be encouraged to:

- develop links with designated second-level schools, promoting an awareness of the opportunities for, and the benefits from, third-level education;
- devise appropriate programmes to ease the transition to full-time third-level education;
- make special arrangements for students to be assigned to mentors who can advise and support them on a regular basis during their first year.

The response of the tertiary institutions recognises that while

The Tertiary Response: Access Initiatives 1994-99

The Access Programmes are driven by a commitment to equality of educational access for all. The programmes aim to address the financial, social, cultural and educational barriers facing students from socio-economically disadvantaged areas from accessing tertiary education. The Programmes are generally targeted programmes which are school based. Links are established on an ongoing basis with the school population and various initiatives are introduced at different stages of the school cycle. The Programmes are informed by the principle of subsidiarity - of working in partnership with parents, schools, Area Based Partnerships, community groups, guidance counsellors and home school-liaison officers and the staff, students and graduates of the institution along with other tertiary institutions. The Programmes generally comprise of a range of pre-entry activities with the targeted schools, and post-entry supports for undergraduate students by the Access Officer.

Access Courses: More recently some tertiary institutions have responded by providing Access Courses for students from disadvantaged areas. The courses are designed for young people who completed the Leaving Certificate who have a particular academic strength or interest but who would require an additional year of education to prepare them for a tertiary course. They offer an alternate pathway to tertiary education for young adults whose social, economic and cultural experiences have prevented them from realising their educational potential. A repetition of the Leaving Certificate is not a realistic nor viable option for these students. The courses are intended to ease the transition from school to an independent learning environment. Applicants are selected on the basis of an interview and participants who successfully complete the Access Course are eligible for direct entry to a full-time undergraduate course.

The Community Based Initiatives were established with the specific intention of attempting to have an educational impact on severely marginalised communities. The aim is to create a small yet increasing critical group of educational achievers to act as role models in the community. The interventions, both financial and cultural aim to increase educational aspirations, not only in the local schools but also in the wider community. Community Based Projects also forge links with a local tertiary institution and in some cases with more than one college.

the primary access barrier for those from a socio-economic disadvantaged background is economic, social and cultural barriers are of considerable significance as are education-specific constraints (Lynch & O'Riordain, 1998).

The various institutional responses comprise of Access Programmes and Access Courses. A number of the institutions have focussed on a community-based approach and forged links with communities and schools. These initiatives are predominately community driven while the Access Programmes and Courses reflect an institutional approach.

Against this background most of the institutions have appointed Access Officers or nominated an individual with specific responsibility for access issues. Most of the tertiary institutions have also introduced measures to create entry routes for these students in the form of direct entry or ex-quota places.

Issues and outcomes

While these Access initiatives generate much valuable work at the level of building links between institutions and their local communities, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the problem needs to be tackled on a national level. At present, given the nature of the access initiatives in place, co-operation across institutions is difficult to implement.

For example, there is no common set of agreed criteria for the selection of students or schools; students from schools participating in targeted direct entry programmes have a limited choice in that they can only access courses on offer in the institutions linked to their schools. Tertiary institutions have no way of catering for other students equally in need of support and it has become clear that there is a need for more research on retention rates within third-level. It is clear too that tracking systems also need to be implemented to gather data on how students entering third-level via an access route fare, and where students go when they drop out or complete their courses.

The fragmented nature of current access activity in Ireland mitigates against real equality of choice, support and mobility for students. In real terms students need to be fortunate enough to live in a target area, attend a designated school linked to an access programme, and want to pursue a course on offer in that particular institution. An integrated national strategy needs to be developed in order

to allow students the broadest choice, with strong pre and post entry support.

Limitations class issues/the role of the state

The State operates as a mediator between students and their educational choices by specifying a range of educational, cultural and economic conditions within which choices are framed. The State controls the organisation of schooling in terms of curricula, examinations, teacher appointments and the relationship between schools and higher education institutions. It is only at State level that real change can occur.

In their recent research, Lynch and O'Riordain (1998), explore how the prevailing ideologies of liberalism perpetuate class based inequalities. Class is a taboo subject in Ireland. There is a resistance to an open debate on the dynamics of existing class structures and their inherent inequalities. The concentration on the few successful individuals serves to perpetuate the myth that the success of the few becomes the pattern for the many. The 'gatekeepers' of the education system preserve the status quo by adhering to traditional and standard entrance systems, thus maintaining the educational, social and cultural barriers facing working class students. Working class students do not give up on the education system, they negotiate and inhabit it with an eye to the opportunities which are open and those which are not.

Current access policy and practice does not address the challenge of eliminating class-based inequality. This can only be achieved by a series of challenges, which must be initiated at several different levels within the education and State system.

Creating knowledge through solidarity

Santos (1999) provides useful insights into the challenge of defining, creating and applying purposeful knowledge. He calls for a postmodernist critical theory that is characterised by a responsiveness to the multiplicity of oppressions that exist thereby making the "different struggles mutually intelligible" (p34) and making resistance to what he calls "the hybrid concept of globalisation" (p35) possible and realisable; a critical theory that allows for the creation of a vision that is unashamedly aspirational in transcending the limitations of what currently exists; and is sustainable only in so far as it continues to be the product of dynamic networking among the

many agents of resistance and change.

Santos distinguishes between two forms of knowledge creation that he terms "...knowledge-as-regulation, whose point of ignorance is called chaos and whose point of knowledge is called order, and knowledge-as-emancipation, whose point of ignorance is called colonialism and whose point of knowledge is called solidarity" (1999: 36). He uses the term 'colonialism' to encapsulate the narrow base whereby knowledge is controlled by an elite, all outside that base are relegated to a not-knowing position, and the differences or otherness of those who are outside are seen as problems to be overcome. Solidarity, on the other hand, refers to the end point of a dynamic process that perceives difference not as a problem, but as the prime site for creating new and purposeful knowledge.

Knowledge-as-emancipation, therefore, not only calls for a recognition of 'others' as knowing subjects but also calls for processes that enable meaningful engagement with those who have been silenced and objectified. Silence, Santos (1999:39) claims, is "...a construction that asserts itself as the symptom of a blockade", a blockade which, he says, results from the imposition of what were presented as "...universal values authorised by reason" but were in fact, reason as defined by the dominant race, sex and social class. For those outside these elite groupings the resulting "...destruction provoked silences that rendered unpronounceable the needs and aspirations of the peoples and social groups whose forms of knowledge were subjected to destruction" (Santos, 1999:39).

The need for meaningful engagement with those who have been excluded from creating knowledge is echoed in the epistemological concerns of radical adult education. The emphasis on creating a participative learning environment is an acknowledgement that those who have in the past been relegated to the position of 'not knowing', have in effect been silenced. Coming to terms with the forces that submerged their needs and aspirations enables those who have been excluded to reassert themselves as 'knowing' and to build on that knowledge.

The challenge for programmes that promote access to formal education is to create a similar learning environment. Otherwise those who enter mainstream education from groups who were formerly excluded, will simply be afforded opportunities to 'consume'

knowledge created within the old paradigm of knowledge-as-regulation. In such a setting these new learners will be enabled merely to conform to the existing system by abandoning their 'otherness' and resuming their silence.

Responses to exclusion

As we have shown tertiary institutions are attempting to broaden their on-campus student base by enabling access to a more diverse range of students than heretofore. This expansion is undoubtedly driven by a complex range of forces including financial considerations, demands for greater equity, changing demographics, a desire to respond to new demands from pressure groups including industry, the availability of funding supports for initiatives that promote greater access, and a commitment to a vision of education that is participatory and democratic. Whether these initiatives respond to the diversity of perspectives and ways of thinking resulting from broadening the learner base, or merely offer opportunities for larger numbers of learners to participate in a fundamentally unchanged and essentially elitist system, is largely dependent on the extent to which these moves are driven by a liberal or radical vision of education and knowledge.

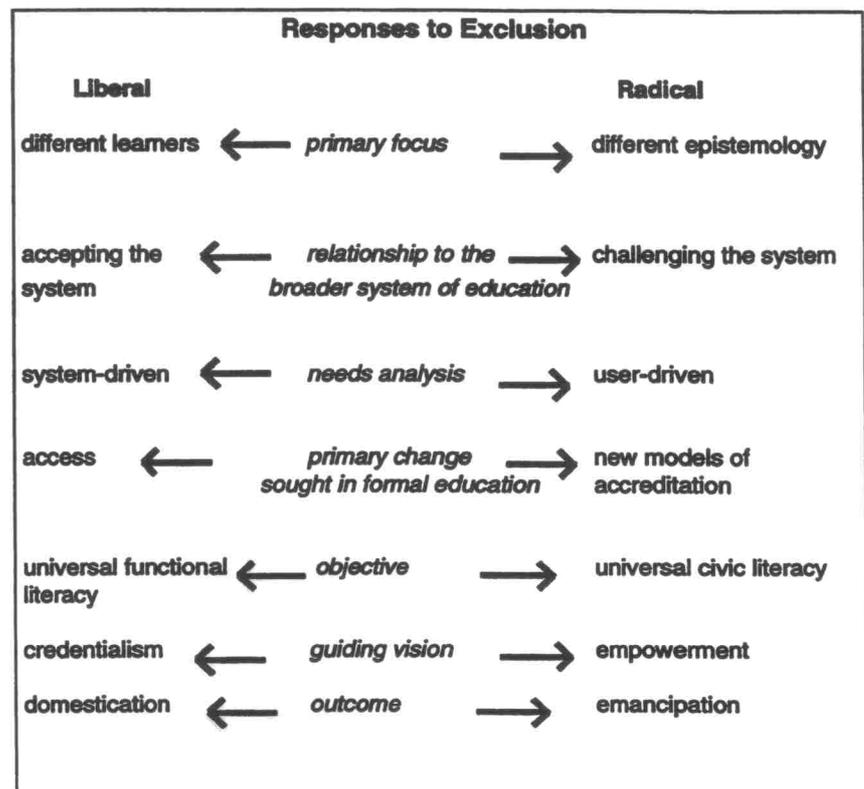
The following diagram depicts the distinguishing characteristics of liberal and radical responses to the challenge of exclusion.

A key difference within both responses relates to how the problem of exclusion is defined. The liberal response assumes that exclusion results from a set of unfortunate circumstances occurring haphazardly, circumstances that can be compensated for by directing additional resources to support individuals who are judged on a case by case basis to be deserving and most likely to benefit. The system of education is seen as a largely benign force reflecting what Santos terms "universal values authorised by reason". Rather than challenge these values the liberal approach aims to expand and modify the existing systems to accommodate greater numbers from different sectors of the population.

A liberal response according to Lynch (1999: 309), will at best "bring limited gain for the relatively advantaged among the disadvantaged". She points out that:

... the internal logic of liberal policies ... treats education as an autonomous site with an ability to promote equality internally irrespective of external forces. By ignoring economic and power inequalities outside of education in particular, it endorses social and economic systems which perpetuate inequality within education. In a global context of structured inequality, the promise of liberal equal opportunities policies is realisable therefore for only a small

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minority of relatively advantaged people within a given disadvantaged group. (Lynch, 1999: 309)

A further distinguishing characteristic of the liberal approach is an unquestioning belief in the conventional formal system as the most desirable medium to deliver education. As far back as the 1970s, Ilich (1971) questioned the capacity of conventional schooling to provide worthwhile education. More recently this issue has again been raised by Webster (1996), who describes the formal system of education as outmoded. Referring to the historical conditions that shaped its development, he claims that although circumstances have changed dramatically, the system remains largely unchanged. He describes it as "...a modern institution in a postmodern world... a symbol of what has passed" (Webster, 1996: 72-73).

By contrast the radical response, distinguished by its concern to tackle the causes of exclusion, has no commitment to maintaining the integrity of the current educational system. On the contrary, it perceives the problem as endemic to the system in which it occurs and assumes that unless the system is fundamentally reformed, it will continue to exclude in ways that are eminently predictable. It further assumes that the factors that exclude specific groupings from participation in education also serve to exclude those same groupings from other services. As such the problem is deep rooted, systemic and self-perpetuating.

It looks to community education as a model of the kind of educational provision that could replace the current system, as we know it. The concept of community education espoused is one that is user-driven rather than system-driven. It is an approach that can be described as:

being firmly community-based, with local groups taking responsibility for playing a key role in organising courses, deciding on programme content and recruiting tutors;

an empowering process, working as an equal partner with the knowledge, skills and experience a learner can offer, and taking account of the cultural and other needs of participants;

an agent of social change and community advancement, which helps communities and individuals to develop strategies to take a more active role in decision-making on issues which affect their lives and

those of their families and communities;

a process built on models of active participation, and inclusive decision-making (Department of Education and Science, 1998: 89).

While the community education described above generally targets adult learners, the age of the learner is of less significance than the shift in emphasis away from the needs of the system and towards the needs of the learner.

Differences between liberal and radical approaches are particularly evident in on-campus access initiatives for those described variously as 'mature' students, students with 'special needs', 'older' learners, and 'non-traditional' students. A liberal response tends to emphasise the 'otherness' and 'outsider' status of these students. Their 'otherness' is defined in terms of how they process information, or respond to established teaching and examining procedures, and the specific supports they need such as childcare or wheelchair ramps. The under-representation of particular sectors of the population is seen as due to factors such as a lack of motivation to participate on their part, little encouragement from peer group and family, financial constraints, and fear of failure. The causes are located in the life styles of the learners. The inability or unwillingness of the system to serve the educational needs of these learners is afforded little attention. Access initiatives that focus exclusively on supporting the individual student to cope with the demands of the institution implies benevolent and ideological neutrality on the part of a system that accommodates them as exceptional cases.

Rather than locate the problem among those who are under-represented, a radical approach recognises the institution as exercising social, cultural, economic and gender preferences reflected in its selection and assessment procedures. A radical approach is concerned to reveal whose 'reason' is being presented under the guise of the 'universal values' that:

- underpin formal education
- essentially determine what constitutes the typical learner and what knowledge is deemed worthwhile
- dictate the purposes of learning and how it is measured
- are replicated throughout the entire educational system from pre-school onwards.

... the tendency to remain aloof from critiquing the knowledge base of the entire education system has allowed piecemeal adjustments to be made often enabling the system to flourish without fundamental change.

Critiques of the broader educational system that raise all of these questions have served to inform the provision of appropriate pre entry courses and support services to learners and staff to widen access for a broader range of learners. While these are important and necessary interventions, the tendency to remain aloof from critiquing the knowledge base of the entire education system has allowed piecemeal adjustments to be made, often enabling the system to flourish without fundamental change.

Redefining solidarity

There is a growing demand among those addressing problems associated with exclusion for formal education to provide a forum to explore and disseminate the lessons they have learned. The opportunities and constraints that impact on the establishment of relationships between these activists and formal educational systems have much to do with the fundamental differences in philosophical positionings of both and in the 'kinds of knowledge' valued by both parties.

This is particularly evident in the demands for inclusion coming from women's community groups. For many years these groups have engaged in educational activities that have experimented with collaborative and mutually supportive ways of learning. They have also become of how educational policies and practices perpetuate exclusion. These groups are searching for progression routes within the broader education system that validate their learning to date and that allow them to continue to learn in participative, collaborative ways. They particularly want access to universities because they recognise that university qualifications are valuable currency in the labour market. However, they want more than mere access to the existing system. They want opportunities to participate in radically reshaping the system so that it can respond to their preferred ways of learning and in so doing, acknowledge these as valid and worthwhile. Furthermore they are concerned that progression through the formal system should not entail renouncing one's identity or becoming alienated from core values. Groups such as these are poised to engage with the 'gate-keepers' of knowledge. They merely need a platform where this engagement can be activated. ■

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