

Holding the line: A slow movement towards a critical professional development for community educators

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Abstract

Professional development is a fundamental, if sometimes, overlooked aspect of nurturing high quality adult education. Creating genuine and engaging spaces for such development presents a number of challenges for organisers in any one of Ireland's sixteen Education and Training Board's community education services who work with a tutor body that are contractually and occupationally precarious and geographically dispersed. In December 2016 a group of adult and community education practitioners came together for a day-long professional development workshop, entitled 'Deepening Practice' in which they critically reflected on their values, philosophies, challenges and opportunities as educators. The workshop was creatively recorded by the graphic harvester, Eimear McNally, as a series of hand-drawn, wall-postered images (Figs. 1-7). In what follows Susan Cullinane, a Community Education Facilitator who was also a participant on the day, and Jerry O'Neill, the workshop co-facilitator, engage in an asynchronous reflective dialogue about the process and significance of the workshop that aspired to be part of a slow move towards a critical and creative professional development space for ETB educators.

Keywords: adult and community education, critical professional development, quality, creative, precarity

facilitated by Jerry O'Neill and Camilla Fitzsimons from the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. The conversations and themes that emerged throughout a day of critical reflection, group dialogue and activities on participants' values, philosophies, challenges and opportunities as educators were creatively recorded by the graphic harvester, Eimear McNally, as a series of hand-drawn, wall-postered images (Figs. 1-7). In what follows Susan, who was also a participant on the day, and Jerry engage in an asynchronous reflective dialogue about the process and significance of the workshop that aspired to be a slow move towards a critical and creative professional development space for ETB educators.

Settling in

Jerry: So, early on a wet, grey Tuesday morning in December, myself, Camilla, Eimear and yourself, Susan, gathered in the ETB centre in Blessington to set up the space and attend to the final bits and pieces that always remain to be done before a session. People started arriving from about 9 am until, in the end, the group composed itself into sixteen participants. In addition to tutors we had some administrative and coordination staff who are centrally involved in community and adult education provision within the service. In fact, I wondered, at one stage, whether having coordinators, like yourself Susan, attend a workshop with tutors would restrict openness in dialogue as you could be seen, if not formally, at least in practice, to represent a line manager role. Was this something you thought about? I was wondering if we should have talked through that more beforehand. With all our sensibility to the play of power in education it seems obvious now that we should.

Susan: It is something that myself and some of my colleagues have considered. For instance, we don't participate at induction workshops for new tutors precisely because we feel that tutors, particularly new tutors to the service, can be more open about the challenges they face. However, due to the dispersed nature of community education provision where we have limited opportunities to spend time with tutors we feel it is important that we are present to hear what the tutors have to say and to get to know them better. Even more so since the amalgamation of the Kildare and Wicklow Community Education Service where we are getting to know tutors working in each other's county. I don't know how all participants felt about this, but one, in their feedback, said that their most significant learning from the day was that the 'KWETB Co-ordinators wanted quality, feel-good education and realised the value of a small number of students getting huge benefit from a course.'

I do think you raise an important point though and I would like to have a space where tutors could come together to discuss their practice without CES staff being present. We tried this in the past and the take up was extremely low but perhaps that could be a recommendation from this experience.

Jerry: Well, that one piece of feedback was a success in itself – that sense of a unity of purpose being forged, or being suddenly made visible, between yourselves as CEFs and the tutors. And I do take your point about the difficulties of getting tutors together on their own – this is something I noticed myself both as a tutor and, later, through my own research with ETB tutors (O’Neill, 2015). It is really difficult to develop and sustain a community of practice amongst such a precarious and dispersed body of educators (James and Biesta, 2007; Scales *et al.*, 2011) – yet something that we must, I feel, work towards achieving if we are genuinely interested in facilitating high quality community education. Maybe we will come back to that...

I have to say that, despite the diversity in tutors’ subject specialism, what really stood out for me as the group formed that morning was the lack of diversity in terms of gender. In fact, the only male in the room was me. I know that the majority of tutors in community education are women, but there are still plenty of male tutors out there and I wondered about this gender imbalance at the workshop.

Susan: We do have male tutors who have attended CPD in the past and who have been open to the process used but the numbers have been low (1-4 men in the last 2 events). Maybe this also reflects the male participation rates (24%) in our community education service. In our situation, though, I feel the biggest difficulty in achieving good attendance is finding a day and location that suits people. As you’ve just alluded to, occupational precarity is becoming an increasingly challenging issue in education in general and community education is no exception: tutors do not have secure contracts; the hours are precarious; and they are likely to be juggling several jobs. It may not be financially feasible to give up a day’s work elsewhere to attend CPD for which they are paid a lower hourly rate than for tuition, particularly if it involves a long journey.

Jerry: I think this is a really significant point and reinforces the link that has been made elsewhere between conditions of work, professional development and quality of education (Research voor Beleid, 2008; Scales *et al.* 2011). And possibly there is some thinking to be done in terms of gender and professional

development too – do you think male tutors frame, or value, CPD differently to their female colleagues?

Susan: I don't know – but wouldn't it be an interesting thing to explore?

Jerry: It really would!

Hopes for the day

Jerry: So we eased ourselves into the day through a series of individual, paired, small and whole group activities which encouraged participants to reflect on their own reasons for attending and to draw us away, momentarily, from all the things that cluttered our thoughts in this break from our normal Tuesday morning routine. Slowly the thin film of tension, or maybe expectation, that accompanies the coming together of a new group for the first time was eased through conversation and the sharing of some personal stories. It was at this stage, that we spent some time identifying the group's hopes for the day.

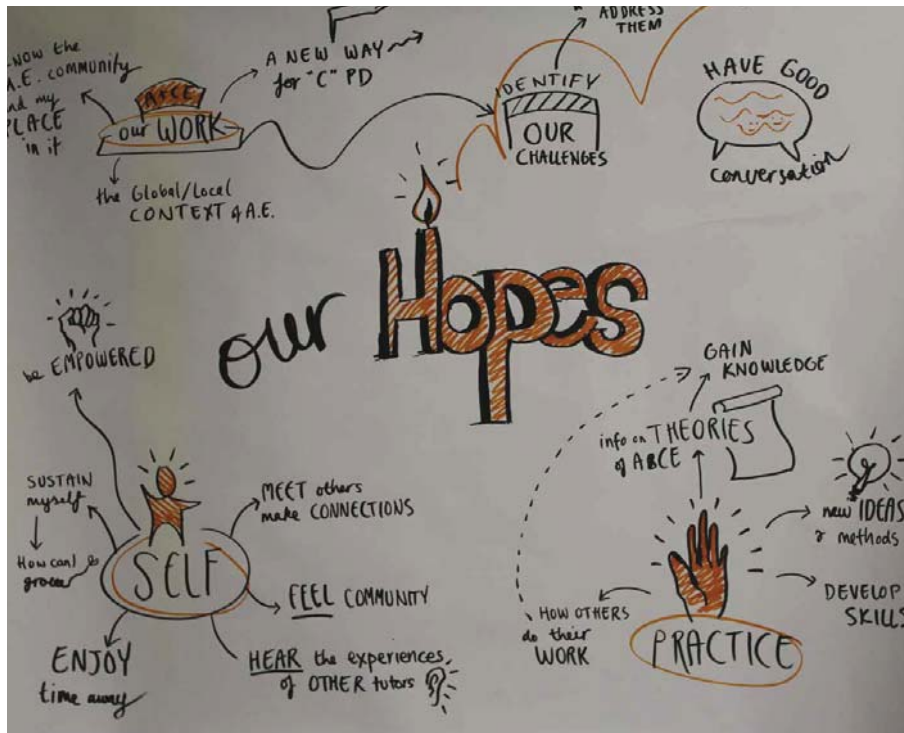


Figure 3

Of course, having these hopes graphically recorded by Eimear provided us with a group-authored resource (Fig. 3) which we could return to at the end of the day to evaluate the workshop.

Excavating personal educational values

Jerry: With the hopes of the participants guiding us, we settled down into the space and moved towards an exploration of participants' educational values. We are always keen to start with where participants are at – and we are also committed to the idea that a critically reflective practice (Bradbury *et al.* 2010) needs to be grounded, first and foremost, in an interrogation of our own beliefs, our own values (Stoll, 2009; Beare, 2012). So, to start this process, we posed a series of four reflective questions:

- When you walk into a room, what is going on that might prompt you to say, 'now that's adult education'?
- What do you see as the fundamental role of the adult educator?
- If there are a set of principles or values that ground your approach as an educator, how would you describe them?
- Why do you do the work that you do?

These questions were informed by similar questions which arose in Camilla's and my work with community and adult educators in our doctoral studies (Fitzsimons, 2015; O'Neill, 2015).

These questions were starting points for personal reflection, then, small group discussion. Generally, the values that started to emerge, as the graphic illustrates (Fig. 4), resonated with ways of approaching groups that would be familiar to adult education practitioners: the facilitator as co-learner in the process; transformative educational aims; the importance of the context and conditions of learning; the importance of the affective and interpersonal dimensions of learning.



Figure 4

From personal values to philosophical positions

Jerry: And you may remember, Susan, right back in our first conversation when the possibility of this workshop was being worked out between us, you asked whether we could do something which would make the links between practice and theory. Well, I'm not so sure they are so separate in adult education (although, interesting enough, these pages sustain such distinctions), but we felt we'd try to do that by exploring how these personal values might correspond to educational philosophical positions.

So, in the next stage of the workshop, we attempted to link these values to broader educational philosophical orientations by asking participants to complete the, rather time-consuming, *Zinn Inventory on Educational Philosophies* (Zinn, 2016). I was, and still am, a bit torn on using such an instrument. Although the end result was useful for the discussion that followed, the process which involved completing a survey of our pedagogical approach was probably too long. But I'm learning from all this slowly too and you made some suggestions afterwards that have given me some ideas about developing a more participative way of doing this in the future.

The purpose of the inventory was to provide some indication of respondents' position in relation to five broad educational philosophies or paradigms: behaviourist; liberal; progressive; humanist; and radical. Once everyone had completed the inventory, we posted the five philosophical positions on sheets around the room and asked participants to stand in a space near or between the paradigms that they scored highest in – again, Eimear really captured that distribution well on the graphic (Fig. 5).

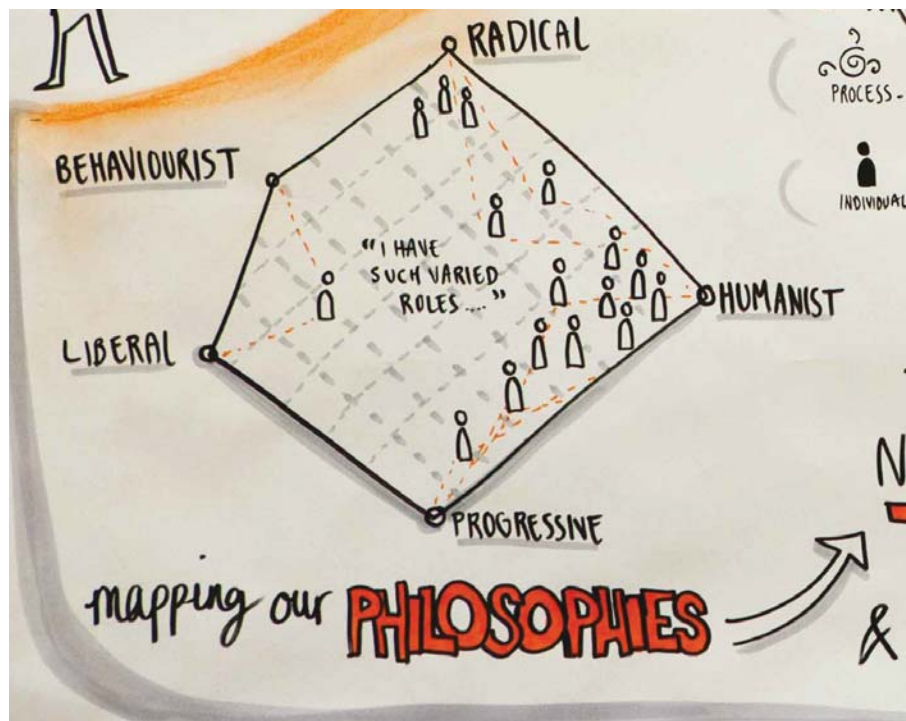


Figure 5

As can be seen, there was a general clustering of participants around humanist and progressive philosophical orientations with a number moving towards radical and one identifying somewhere between behaviourist and liberal.

Anyway, with much caution about holding on too firmly to these philosophical labels, we discussed what they might mean and mentioned theorists who we might associate with each (Rogers, 1961; Bloom and Krathwohl, 1972; Skinner, 1974; Knowles, 1984; hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996; Newman, 1996; Nussbaum,

1997; Dewey, 1997; Maslow, 1999; Connolly *et al.*, 2007). But how was this part of the workshop for you, Susan?

Susan: I felt that there was a level of ‘aha’ when people saw their results from the inventory, a sense of recognition or ‘that explains how I experience the work’. It was very useful to have the theoretical underpinnings and signposts for further reading.

It highlights to me that if we are serious about fulfilling the Department of Education’s aim of community education as ‘contributing to civic society’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2012, p. 3) then we need to look at moving towards the radical perspective. However, all approaches have benefits in certain situations.

And, yes, it is worrying that personal development or community development programmes are being measured by behaviourist standards and criteria. Although some work has been done by ETBI to develop a tool to measure the wider benefits of learning, this is not yet at implementation stage (Community Education Facilitators’ Association (CEFA), 2016).

Regarding QQI (Quality & Qualifications Ireland) I feel that there is some flexibility in designing alternative assessment but that is an area that would need more development i.e. how to design and implement these. Perhaps there is a tendency to use tried and trusted methods?

Jerry: Maybe...and, yet, maybe starting to think about the ideas, the values that underpin conventional assessment design or curricula and looking at those alongside our own values and philosophies as a sector and as individuals is a step in gaining more confidence to do things differently.

And although I’m really not sure how useful this part of the day was in the end, at least one participant got something out of it – chatting to her afterwards she said that this was the best part of the day for her. She had been working as a community educator for many years and was always a bit resistant to ‘theoretical stuff’ but at the workshop, so she said, she could start to not just see the connections of theory to the ways she worked but also the importance of theory – how it could act as any ally for her in justifying her ways of working.

It was also interesting to see the strongest concentration around humanist and progressive positions. People spoke really strongly about their commitment

to their learners and things like the ‘learner experience’ – I got the sense that tutors genuinely respected and acknowledged the knowledge learners brought to a group and worked hard to enhance the growth of each individual learner. I think when we’re caught up in the personal intensity of such pedagogic relationships, it can be, sometimes, hard to shift our gaze a bit and see an educational purpose that isn’t defined by the individual learner as such but by something more abstract, such as social transformation. Of course, there were a few participants scattered between the radical and the humanist – torn a bit between the personal and the social focus of adult education. And, to be honest, that’s where I always end up when I do this exercise and leaves me, I suppose, as a kind of radical-humanist educator – or maybe, humanist-radical. I’m not sure which.

But, you’re right, Susan you could see people were really puzzling the significance of these positions out in terms of their practice.

Challenges and tensions for practitioners

Jerry: And so, all these activities, reflections and discussions about personal values and philosophical positions took us up to lunch. The rest of the day was spent looking at challenges and opportunities for educators.

As a group we had talked a lot already at that stage, so, we asked participants to get into groups to express their challenges visually as a piece of drama or a Boalian-inspired embodied still image piece (Boal, 1998). These images were then presented, without comment from the presenting groups, as the rest of us tried to read the challenges in the pieces (Fig. 6). What kind of challenges did you see in these pieces Susan?

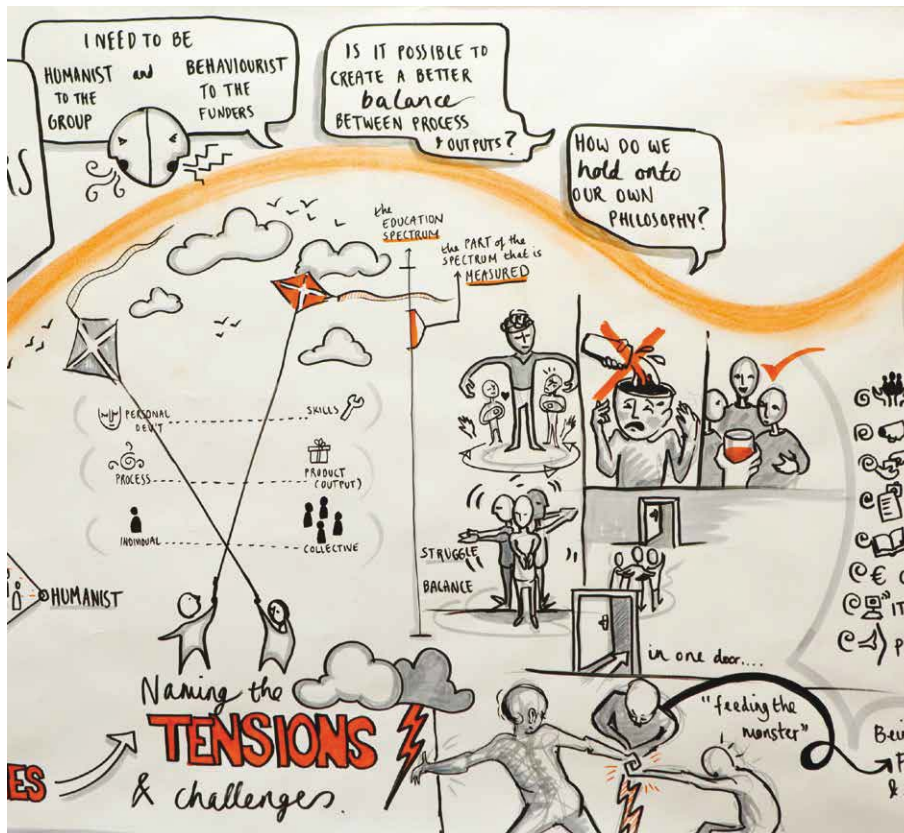


Figure 6

Susan: Well, there's something to me about quality versus quantity – we touched on this earlier when talking about philosophies and values and the ways of measuring the impact of learning. It feels like more emphasis is placed on quantitative data. As I mentioned it is hoped that a tool will be developed to measure the wider benefits of learning – but there is no sign of it yet. The process is key for successful implementation of community education projects but there is little recognition or support given to that.

The other thing I saw in these pieces was the tension between individual learning and collective learning. Where possible we try to include group activities in our projects to embed the idea of collective learning.

And another challenge is to keep a balance in work that falls into different parts of the community education continuum – Personal Development, Community Development and Active Citizenship. There is a lot to unpack in these pieces.

What can we do?

Jerry: There certainly is and I'm still thinking about them. I'm so glad we have Eimear's images – they are really important reflective artefacts.

At this stage of the day we were pushed for time but we were keen that tutors wouldn't leave with the last word being on the barriers they are confronted with in their work. We asked participants to reflect on what is in our control to confront these challenges, as educators, and, coming back to the earlier part of the workshop, to identify at least one thing we could do to help us work in a way that is more consistent with our values. A range of responses emerged – many relating to the need for more dialogue and peer support (Fig. 7) but what came across very clearly for me was the need for a robust community that could tell the stories of the powerful work they were doing as educators and to fight to both protect the work and push the boundaries of what is deemed possible.

We finished the day, more rushed than we would have liked, but mindful of the agreed finishing time, by a brief evaluative exercise, which used the graphically-harvested hopes outlined by the participants at the start of the day (Fig. 3).



Figure 7

Final thoughts and what next?

Jerry: So, Susan, maybe, we could just finish ourselves with some evaluative thoughts on the day?

Susan: I felt it was a worthwhile day. It was well attended and the participation was excellent. It sparked several ideas that could be taken forward as part of a more regular CPD such as continuing to document and highlight our work. Having a day like this is one way, particularly having the visual record and this conversation. We have also used film to record projects and at the moment we are creating story boards for another piece of work.

I'm thinking of the idea that CPD is the single most important factor in good educational practice and quality and, also, thinking about creating spaces for a tutor-led peer support structure to emerge and some longer training to raise the capacity of tutors and others working in this area.

Jerry: Yes, I'd agree with the centrality of CPD in a high-quality practice. But for me, it seems imperative to reinforce that link clear between CPD, occupational precarity and quality that we touched on at the beginning. Standing, in his study of precarious labour in a global context, refers to the temporal dimensions of such work and, in particular, how 'futureless' work is now part of such labour more generally: 'there is no "shadow of the future" hanging over their actions, to give them [the precariat] a sense that what they say, do or feel today will have strong and binding effect on their longer-term relationships' (2011, p. 12).

In fact, I came across similar concerns about perceptions of career futures elsewhere (Lopes and Dewan, 2015; Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015) and in my own research with ETB adult education tutors – that tutors' precarity really impacted on their sense of a professional identity and, importantly in any discussion around quality, development. As one experienced tutor put it,

For tutors

there is nothing

to go towards

there is nowhere to go.

(O'Neill, 2015, p. 120)

This sense of a futureless occupation for tutors is, I think, highly significant for ETBs if, coming back to James and Biesta (2007) and Scales *et al.* (2011), we accept the dependency of quality on professional development in adult education. Any professional development process is based on the temporal dimension of practice and requires some sense of stability of, and in, an occupational past, present and future. How can any sense of a developmental arc for adult educators be facilitated when their presents and futures are so unstable, so unsure?

Susan: And developing the idea of slow education...we talked a lot before and during the session about slowing things down – about the difficulties we all found in making the time to pause and reflect, individually and communally, on the small and the big stories of our work – how might we do that?

Jerry: Well, I think coming together to write this is part of an attempt to resist the linear rush of work – to go back on things that we think are important – to make the time. Maybe we should shift, a bit more resolutely, towards our radical positions and, as O’Neill *et al.* (2014) and Mountz *et al.* (2015) urge us, to see slowness as a feminist-inspired political act of resistance against the ‘accelerated timelines’ of educational managerialism. Maybe that’s all part of the critical professional development that we are trying to work through together.

But whatever about the lack of temporal spaces for development, I think we’re running out of white space for this particular reflective dialogue.

I’ve really enjoyed carrying on the conversation from December, Susan, and, hopefully, we can sustain it into the future somehow.

Susan: I’ve loved this collaborative way of writing an article. It has given me a great opportunity to tease out the work and been another step in building collaborative relationships that I hope we can build on.

Jerry: sounds good Susan – count me in!

Susan: I look forward to it, Jerry.

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