

# What learning means to me

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Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the  
MEd in Adult and Community Education  
Department of Adult and Community Education  
Maynooth University

2019

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“Still, when you bring passion, curiosity, openness, and care to your work, novel experiences will ensue, and your ideas will emerge”  
(Charmaz, 2006, p.185).

## **DEDICATION**

I want to dedicate this work to my mum, late dad and late grandparents who have always encouraged and supported my choices.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Myles my husband for not asking too many questions.

My children Molly, Malachy, Maddy and Myles for fuelling my thoughts and imagination and for living with an empty fridge for the last couple of weeks.

Thank you to my supervisor, Camilla, for guiding me exactly where I wanted to go, when I didn't know I wanted to go there!

Thank you to Brid, Fergal, Michael and Gerry for creating a human and democratic learning environment.

I am very grateful to the participants of this research who are truly dedicated to the ethos of progressive education.

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION .....  | 8  |
| SETTING THE SCENE.....                                      | 11 |
| The Shoelace .....  | 11 |
| Where is this going? .....                                  | 13 |
| Mixed feelings.....   | 13 |
| Who’s talking? .....  | 16 |
| THE DREADED PART .....                                      | 17 |
| Why methodology? .....                                      | 17 |
| What is research? .....                                     | 18 |
| My world view? .....  | 19 |
| My position as a critical researcher.....                   | 20 |
| Where do I think knowledge come from? .....                 | 22 |
| My ways of knowing.....                                     | 23 |
| THE COHERENT PART .....                                     | 25 |
| Why qualitative research? .....                             | 25 |
| Elements of autoethnography .....                           | 25 |
| Research participants.....                                  | 27 |
| Interview – the process with participants .....             | 29 |
| The process with myself.....                                | 32 |
| Reflexivity.....  | 33 |
| Ethics.....   | 34 |
| THE STORIES.....  | 36 |
| Playing with my grandparents.....                           | 36 |
| An organised chaos .....                                    | 37 |
| Did I learn English?.....                                   | 38 |
| The HDip and Masters or when I thought I was clued in ..... | 40 |
| TRANSITION.....   | 43 |
| THE TALK.....   | 45 |
| Learning .....  | 45 |
| 1 -The power of the experience .....                        | 45 |
| 2 - A social process .....                                  | 46 |
| 3 - Thinking learning “outside the box” .....               | 48 |
| 4 - Thinking learning outside of school, can we? .....      | 51 |
| Education.....  | 54 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1 - The environment.....                             | 54 |
| 2 - The process.....                                 | 55 |
| Knowledge .....                                      | 57 |
| 1 - What is knowledge? .....                         | 57 |
| 2 - The nature of knowledge.....                     | 59 |
| How does it work?.....                               | 61 |
| 1 - Are we naturally critical thinkers? .....        | 61 |
| 2 – Who is the critical educator? .....              | 62 |
| 3 – What is the person-centred approach? .....       | 64 |
| 4 – What about the caring relationship? .....        | 65 |
| What are the risks? .....                            | 65 |
| THE COOL PART.....                                   | 67 |
| Education is social and political.....               | 68 |
| A voice for the individual and the collective.....   | 70 |
| An engagement with learners .....                    | 71 |
| An engagement with the state .....                   | 72 |
| Learning .....                                       | 73 |
| Not so cool after all .....                          | 74 |
| CONCLUSION.....                                      | 78 |
| REFERENCES.....                                      | 79 |
| Appendix 1: The consent form with participants ..... | 86 |
| Appendix 2: The consent form with my children.....   | 89 |
| Consent Form .....                                   | 89 |

## **RIDDLE**

We do it all the time, every day and anywhere.

It does not cost anything and can change lives.

Any idea?

It's unique to each of us and yet only works with the collective.

Another clue?

It's challenging, exciting and sometimes disturbing.

Final clue.

It does not exist in isolation of a social, political and cultural context.

Yes, you got it.

Learning.

I want to look at what learning means to me.

I have decided to do this research through my own stories and use my voice to make sense of my learning. However, not feeling 100% sure that my voice was enough, I have also talked to research participants who I think embody the learning I have experienced.

## INTRODUCTION

I am new enough to the world of adult education and research but when I started the Masters<sup>1</sup> and looked for ideas for my thesis. I was instantly drawn by what I call “my interest in learning”. I’ve had it for years!

It is very vague, very wide and I was unsure, up until finalising this work where I was going. All I knew however is that my interest was drawn from prior learning experiences that I have identified as making me, me!

Doing the HDip<sup>2</sup> in Adult and Further Education<sup>3</sup> and now the Masters have been life changing experiences. Yet it is difficult to explain what life-changing means.

A short summary is that I am not the person I was three years ago, and I see the world differently. My values, beliefs, perspectives have changed.

Hard to believe that something, like values, beliefs and perspectives, I would think I was nearly born with, can be shifted (Mezirow, 1991).

With this research, I want to explore the learning that I have associated with that change.

Even though I did enrol for the course, I was a bit uncomfortable to engage with most of what the course is about: critical analysis.

I did not see myself...

... as academic or an academic (still don't), I see myself as a practitioner, I make learning happen for others, but I had never really engaged in theorizing.

...as a writer? unclear and scattered thinking gets in the way of my writing all the time. However, I have forced myself into it. I did not realise writing was the way out of getting stuck into a no idea’s land. Writing and thinking or thinking and writing happen at the same time and I have given myself a voice.

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1 The Masters is a one-year long course that allows reflection and exposure of concerns on the field of Adult, Further and Community Education.

2 The HDip or Higher Diploma in Further Education is a professional teaching qualification in further education. The course has combined elements of teaching practice and theoretical knowledge on the philosophies of Adult and Further Education

3 Adult and Further Education is a very wide yet undefined field, for the purpose of this research I will define it as any form of education available for people over the age of 16 years, that is not formal secondary schooling and Higher Education.

...as producing a publishable document? The thought of this work being published makes me feel like an impostor amongst more qualified and experienced writers.

...as being political? Most theories relevant to adult learning are anchored in Marxist and left wing ideologies. I am familiar with them but not deeply knowledgeable. Additionally, I am not particularly engaged in any form of activism. So, there is a fear that I will not get into the depth of critical analysis.

However, I am willing and motivated and ready to change since it has happened to me before!

...the ideological outcome of a critical dialogue must always be open, and educators must accept the possibility that engaging in this dialogue may cause them to alter some of their most strongly held, fundamental assumptions. (Brookfield, 1993, p. 78)

I was starting to narrow my research question, learning, learning, learning...Reading about it, looking at where my vision of learning happens. It always brought me back to my own learning moments, these moments that struck me and made me take a turn of opinion, emotions, mindset, these moments that I still remember many years later. There must be something there that is worth freezing and contemplating. This is what I want to capture with this work.

Initially, I did not trust my ability to connect with readers bringing my own experiences only and to use my own experiences to expose a concern. I did not feel that my own experiences would be enough to justify a full body of work.

This raised some anxiety and confidence issues. I have since lived with this anxiety since “trusting that it can be a sign of being fully alive in an educative process, a strong and true part of it, a doorway to growth rather than a closed and sealed off experience” (McCormack, 2009, p. 23).

I was also very curious to talk to participants whom I would consider experts in the field of Adult Education and explore their experiences.

Part of the research methods is based on my stories and another part on interviews.

Now and then the research is interrupted by paintings, sayings, anonymous quotes. These are snapshots (gathered from popular culture) of an emotion that I find completes this work for me.

They expose an emotion or comfort an opinion, they also reflect on how sometimes I got carried away not wanting to read the best of key thinkers, but looked at who else, or how else, in “non-academic” terms, I could unveil my thoughts.

I find items from popular culture easy to relate to and to identify with and yet they allow an understanding of complex theories and concepts.

I want to understand learning using the subjective perspectives of the participants involved, including my own perspectives. I am interested in life stories, experiences and emotions. Subjectivity means concentrating on the meaning people give to their environment, not the environment itself. It would be impossible to understand the world independently from people’s interpretations of it (May, 2016).

hooks (1994) defines her subjectivity as her “own desire to work from a lived understanding of the lives of poor black women” (p. 53) and also claims that “subjectivity, essence, identity” (p. 78) are active signs of political resistance.

This body of work is not neutral and is 100% subjective.

My near haiku<sup>4</sup>...

*I learn through living  
In a world of endless knowledge  
How can I connect?*

It feels like this is a good summary of my hopes and concerns.

The frustration of the turmoil, not knowing what to do, how to do it, having to find out by myself.

This is hard but possible.

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<sup>4</sup> A haiku is a very short Japanese poetry in three phases. Five, seven and five syllables. It was a spontaneous exercise during one of my lectures for the Masters. The key word that led to it was "connect".

## **SETTING THE SCENE**

My research like most research, is driven by an interest (May, 2016), my interest is learning and trying to explore what it is about my learning that makes me feel good about it.

### **The Shoelace**

It all started in primary school. I was probably four or five years old. I used to go to a rural school in the South of France with sixty children, in total, divided in three groups with three teachers.

I remember being the only one in my class able to tie my shoelace and the teacher asked me to help the younger ones. Bear in mind, these days there were no Velcro and that meant a lot of shoelaces had to be tied to get ready for the breaks outside!

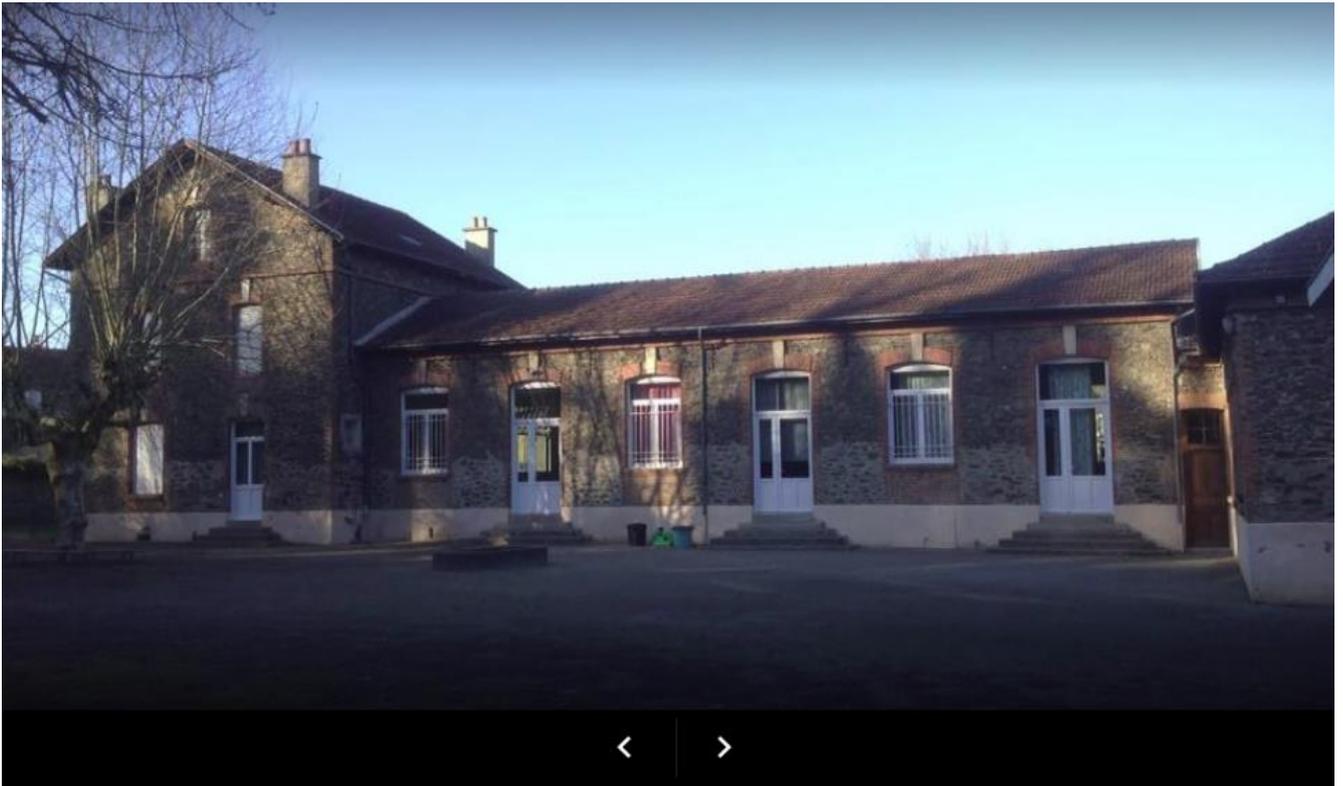
I still remember how I felt when she asked me to help – I felt proud, valued, praised, trusted, acknowledged. Scared and intimidated too by this responsibility because I was very shy...however I was on top of the world! I was an only child and this task made me feel like I belonged to a group where my skills and experiences were needed.

School was a good place for me to be in. As an educational space, it made me feel good.

I think the root of my interest in learning starts from this empowering feeling.

Theorists in the field of Adult Learning such as Dewey (1938), Rogers (1969) and Mezirow (1991) have placed the principles of growth (intellectual, moral and physical) at the core of learning to change and learning for change.

This is my school.



It is in the small town of Aubin in the South West of France.

It does look like a school, doesn't it? Big building, a bit austere and yet it felt so warm and cosy. I belonged there.

I have learnt how to live with others there and I am so grateful for my teachers who showed me so much respect.

I have chosen this picture to give you a sense of being there with me in that scene (Humphreys, 2005).

Think about it, have you had one of these moments that you can look back and realise, this is it!

This is where it all started...

## **Where is this going?**

My interpretation of this episode still has an impact on my life and influences the way I am envisaging education. Somehow, somewhere, I have learnt how to learn in a space where I felt trusted and cared for (Rogers, 1969). I believe this is the first element that makes me say I have learnt how to appreciate learning.

This is the starting point for my research, however, remembering this experience has brought me to too many places and to a lot of confusion, still does.

One thing is sure, learning is at the core of what I want to research. Learning as a process, as a mindset, as a skill that can be developed, as a way to self-growth and to engage with others, as a tool for social change?

What does this mean for the research? I am now starting to narrow down my thoughts...

What about exploring learning and education and the nature of knowledge?

What about finding out what learning for change means.

And encourage us to reflect on this question “Why is it that we become disengaged from learning? “...we rarely appreciate its uniqueness and contemplate its meaningful existence” (O’Brien, 2016, xii).

Learning has its own dynamics that seem to be located outside of formal beaten tracks. It is not a commodity (Illich, 2017, 2018).

## **Mixed feelings**

I am excited about what I would like to explore, at the same time, I have doubts.

Are my experiences worth sharing? Do I really want to make a private and personal experience a public matter? Will I be understood for what I mean? Who am I to impose knowledge that way?

As is often common in auto-ethnographic influenced research, I feel exposed for sharing my experiences and I am scared of being judged too harshly (McCormack, 2009), what Vickers as cited in Humphreys (2005) calls “writing on the edge—and without a safety net” (p. 852).

However, that fear and these doubts are, I feel, compensated by a need I have to “deconstruct borders” (Rosen as cited in Humphreys 2005, p. 852) between myself as the writer, my identity, my role, and my readers.

I have never shared my shoelace experience with anyone and yet I am happy to write it in a thesis that can be published. This is where the power of the written world gives me a bit of breathing space, as if I was holding my breath for a while and letting it all go now.

That's it, I have said it.

Fast-forwarding forty odd years now and contemplating my children and their schooling journey. I do not sense the feelings of empowerment, belonging, overall happiness going to school that I felt. I hear their frustrations, their lack of understanding for what they do and why they do it. In one word, their powerlessness. We discuss how their happiness and personal development are seriously undermined and compromised by the educational system they find themselves in.

My observation of the educational school system is that it is not making my children happy and aware of the world they live in. In an inspiring video Gray (2018) explains how schools and other activities are meant for building a curriculum vitae and do not encourage passion. In fact, he emphasized how much over the past few years creative thinking has decreased amongst school going children.

A study he carried in 2011 has shown that people, in charge of their own education, based on an interest-led education through play and exploration, were able to follow their passion and interest and turn these into jobs (Gray & Riley, 2013).

With this work, I would like to explore through my own stories and research participants' experiences, what is the learning that can fuel a passion for learning.

I am thinking positive but remain "An optimistic with no illusion whatsoever" (Apple, 00:14:28 – 00:14:31). Researching learning also means looking at education and knowledge. The width and interpretation of these two topics gives a lot of room for wide imaginative and daring discussions for an alternative philosophy of education.

We need to ask ourselves what education has the potential to do and look at the purpose of education (Finnegan, 2016). To be able to focus on the how and not on the why and not to see education as an end but as a ground to discuss learning within the context of social equality and democracy (Allman, 1999).

Finnegan (2016) encourages us "to explore alternative future for adult education", and think "imaginative and ambitious proposals", in a climate that meets "the challenges of a rapidly changing, fragile and interdependent world..." (p. 46).

According to Allman (1999), an alternative educational approach is the only way to introduce praxis within formal and informal educational settings. The imagination we need to discuss learning is an engagement to review and define learning spaces and knowledge.

This will bring us to looking at spaces where the learning that takes place is grounded on social transformation.

I was drawn by the work of Ivan Illich and his view of de-institutionalising society and particularly deschooling education. This radical view appealed to me initially as it positioned itself as an antithesis of what is there, or a revolutionary brand-new start.

Ivan Illich (1926 – 2002) was a Croatian-Austrian philosopher and a Catholic priest. "Deschooling Society" is the book that brought him to public attention when he envisaged the de-institutionalisation of education seen as oppressive and manipulative of people and knowledge.

However, I rapidly lost my optimism reading "Deschooling Society" because Illich does not have a learning theory, just a criticism of the school system as an institution (Todd, 2012). There is no direct link between deschooling society and social change for equalities and it is not clear if and how institution really pervert personal and community development (Todd, 2012).

Illich's view is based on negativity and the refusal of institutions by developing on the irrationalities and inefficiencies of the schooling system. As far as I am concerned, thinking alternative is hopeful, thinking from ground zero is more depressing! I want to remain optimistic and look at how things could be different.

***"It's better to know how to learn than to know"***

***Dr Seuss<sup>5</sup>***

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<sup>5</sup> Dr Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel 1904 - 1991) was an American writer and cartoonist. *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham* are some of his best-sellers and include the rhymes and characters that have made him famous.

## Who's talking?

I have decided to isolate the learning experiences that have had a life changing impact on me.

I found out that the learning I value has strong associations with learning theories typically associated with Adult Education and adult learning.

To illustrate this statement, I invite you to a discovery of what learning means to me, we will go through what I call my vignettes or my learning moments, my eye-openers. The stories that have changed my view of the world, raised my awareness of my environment and help me problematise learning as a concept.

According to Freire (1970), creating the conditions to encourage people to problematise their reality will lead to changing their world and condition.

Paolo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian educator and philosopher. He has dedicated his life and research to improve the lives of oppressed people by highlighting the negative impact of banking education and by developing a philosophy around humanising people through critical reflection of their realities and social lives. Paolo Freire is certainly the most influential theorist in Adult Education.

It was important for me to follow a path for this research and ask myself what is the backbone?

What is the scaffolding of this work? To guide us with this, we will explore my methodology.

I will escort you to my stories and invite you into my learning space.

We will then discuss with thinkers and theorists who have helped me develop a critical approach towards my research.

We will finally engage with the lived experiences of the research participants, who for me, embody alternative ways of learning.

*"You think you are not educated enough to teach your own children, so you want to send them to the same institution that didn't educate you enough to educate children?"<sup>6</sup>*

I wanted to conclude this part with this quote. which captures how I feel about the contradictions, hard-to-justify reasons, we live with and give ourselves for doing what we do.

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<sup>6</sup> I came across this quote on Facebook from a page I follow called "The Unschool Dad". It is an American Facebook page that promotes learning outside of schools.

## **THE DREADED PART**

I will discuss in the chapter below my methodology.

My choice for qualitative research, how elements of autoethnography have slowly but surely crept into my qualitative research and my choice of interviewing participants.

### **Why methodology?**

I wanted to discuss learning but did not know how to do it. Then I realised that I had a story to tell but did not know how to say it. For me, the dreaded methodology part really came together at the end of my thinking and reading process.

It has taken me awhile to understand the importance of methodology in social research and to accept that I needed to think about one in the first place!

My initial reluctance about thinking methodology was my concern about exposing myself. Loads of questions arose...Do I have a world view? Do I even want to share my world view? Are my stories interesting? How do I pick the research participants? Am I able to expose truly my research participants' viewpoints?

Now, as I write this piece, I realise that, if I am not willing to tell my stories and unveil my views, I cannot offer a perspective of the world.

Additionally, accepting that my stories have shaped me is accepting subjectivity and the necessity to understand context. Methodologically, my own identity is what brings the research.

I dreaded writing this part because I am not sure of who I am, and I find this part intrusive.

It requires me to have a position and a justification.

I need to accept the turmoil and chaos that the process of building and making sense of my research means for me, it is problem-posing and not problem-solving (Freire, 1970) and that is the only way to move forward. It is a real transformative experience that leads to my ongoing change and shifts of opinions (Mezirow, 1991).

It is not a comfortable experience as it comes with self-doubt, contradictions and will possibly expose gaps.

My methodology reflects that whole process. My research is not about bringing solid answers but creating a space to ask relevant questions about learning. It does not have a beginning and an end; it is a space for reflection.

I have looked at this research through the lens of a parent, a researcher, a practitioner, a businesswoman, a now middle class white educated woman from a working-class background.

I think this is why it has been hard for me to define a research question, depending on what lens I was using I had different areas I wanted to unveil.

So, answers to questions such as why have I picked this topic? why did I decide to use my experiences? why I have decided to interview the participants I have selected? how I introduced myself? what questions have asked? Are big clues about who I am...

From day one of sitting the Masters course, I was very excited to do qualitative research and talk to “experts”, people whom I thought new more than me, having more experience than me in the area of adult education.

I probably neglected Charmaz (2006) recommendations to let the research problem shape the research methods as the research problem may point to one method of data collection. Instead I have let the methods, which was interviewing participants, lead my topic.

Through the course I understood that my research question was my relationship with learning. That is why I accepted autoethnography half-way through this work.

Let’s start from the beginning...

### **What is research?**

According to May (2016), the idea of social research is finding frameworks that make ‘sense’ of data. That takes, discipline, maturity and an understanding of the practice of research. He also emphasizes that research is not only about what is produced but how it is produced.

Good research is a matter of techniques and a matter of the identity and the integrity of the researcher.

As I am trying to make sense of the method I have used, it looks like my research process is led by the principles of grounded theory, where the theory is built from what I have seen and starts with

people's experience (my own and research participants). It does not look for evidence on a theory (Mezirow, 2015).

Charmaz (2006) points out that grounded theory is not a linear process and engages the researcher in writing whenever ideas occur. Any new idea will generate new knowledge and reviewing previous work. At that point, knowledges are created simultaneously and continuously by the researcher and the participants (O'Neill, 2016).

Ultimately, social research is carried with a certain interest in mind and wants to challenge the way we think and tell us something about the world (May, 2016).

My interest is to give life to learning and explore it as a dynamic process not an end.

### **My world view?**

Establishing an ontology position for his research has not been an easy task and is still work in progress.

My understanding of ontology is the understanding of the world we live in, of what exist, how things work around me. How do I see the social world around me?

I have a strong humanistic approach and believe that people are inherently good, and we are self-motivated to learn and to improve within a growth promoting climate. I truly believe this growth promoting climate started with my shoe-lace experience.

According to Rogers (1969), "we possess a very considerable knowledge of the conditions which encourage self-initiated, significant, experiential, gut-level" learning by the whole person" (p.105).

I have an unconditional trust and respect for human beings and a deep interest to understand human needs. For me learning is a basic human need.

Carl Rogers (1902-1987) was an American psychologist and a founding figure of humanistic psychology. His influential psychotherapy method known as client-centred therapy is now widely used in education to develop a student-centred approach to learning.

Based upon my own experiences and reflections on learning, learning has given me an identity and possibly a sense of freedom (Rogers, 1969).

I have also experienced learning in various spaces that were not necessarily within schools. o acknowledging these educational spaces is a step forward to understanding the social context (Illich, 2018 and Crowther, 2014, 2015).

However, even if I believe that working through the self, first, can help promote core values of care, respect and fairness, I cannot dissociate the self from social relations and social context. “The self is a product of social processes, not their origin” (Young, 1988, p.10).

I see the world with inequalities, power structures and knowledge that is generated by people who own money, resources, norms and values, in other words, a dominating class. I see unequal relationships that affect people’s lives from a material aspect and most importantly from a conscience and knowledge aspect (Gramsci, 1971).

I am starting to position myself here as a critical researcher with a humanist tint.

Deep down I am really concerned about human suffering and the reproduction of inequalities.

Plummer (2011) defines the critical humanist researcher as someone who focuses on human subjectivity, experience, creativity and emotions. The values are the ones to reduce human suffering, increase freedom, care and compassion, and trust in each other.

### **My position as a critical researcher**

According to Lincoln (2011), the critical researcher

expose the diversity of reality, engage with the webs of interaction that construct problems in ways that lead to power/privilege for particular groups, reposition problems and decisions towards social justice, join in solidarity with the traditionally oppressed to create new ways of functioning. (p.83)

She also states that “the researcher is both instrument of the critique of power and collaborative agent in joining with traditionally marginalized communities” (p. 85).

I feel here that I can become both the topic of research and researcher, a knowledge worker (Freire, 1970). This somehow reassures me in my consideration and acceptance of autoethnography and the use of vignettes in my inquiry. As I will detail further in the next chapter.

The position of the critical researcher is therefore not neutral and in fact it is acceptable for the researcher to expose their political views and values to the research participants.

According to Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg (2011), all thoughts position themselves within a power relation background (historical and/or social).

The critical researcher value system is often the result of believing that oppressors have control over the oppressed and the oppressed situation cannot be avoided.

There are many forms of oppression sexism, racism, ageism are some examples, focusing on one will automatically open up a connection to another one.

I need to make a note here on my use of the term oppression and oppressed throughout my work. Paolo Freire's (1970) definition of oppression is the dehumanisation of people, it is the prevention of people by the oppressors to be fully human. He sees human beings, objects of theory and not subjects.

What is bothering for me in Freire's view of oppression is the dichotomised version of oppression in a capitalist framework of landowners versus peasants. It is a very black and white version that neglects oppressions that can exist within a same group and has certainly neglected issues of gender or race.

I am struggling with the assumption, that a critical researcher has no problem looking at critical research using the works of Gramsci and Freire for example with Marx's framework.

Even if, I am aware that:

With Marx as a background, Freire could not be clearer; but without that background, readers will take from Freire what seems meaningful to them . . . if you abstract Freire's ideas from their Marxist theoretical context, you will miss the precision of his analysis and ignore the revolutionary or transformative intent of his work. (Allman as cited in Schugurensky 2000, p. 518)

I just find myself uncomfortable looking at Freire's work with the Marxist lens. His vision does not focus on smaller group experiences, oppressions that exist amongst them and their social relations.

I am more comfortable using Young's (2014) research and her definition of oppression.

She has reflected on groups who have been oppressed, maybe not to the same extent or the same ways, but have all "suffer(ed) some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings" (p. 4). She has defined the five faces of oppression as violence, cultural imperialism, exploitation, marginalization and powerlessness.

I will be looking at oppression using that lens. For me it is more relatable.

When I said earlier that I was starting to position myself as critical researcher it is partially true. I do want to use my experiences to expose human suffering and research ways of learning to change and learning for change.

However, I do not think that social action is the only goal of adult learning, learning should be about getting the skills and knowledge to take social action (Mezirow, 1991). Indeed, these skills and tools are indispensable to think critically about power structures and inequalities.

### **Where do I think knowledge come from?**

For me, knowledge generation comes from the lived experience, is personal and is unique to each individual. The lived experience is not a thing of the past to reflect on, it is the doing, here and now that generates knowledge on the spot. That knowledge is used for making meaning of that experience and of our reality (Gramsci, 1971; Dewey, 1938; Mezirow, 1991).

“Research participants' implicit meanings, experiential views-and researchers' finished grounded theories-are constructions of reality” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10).

This lived experience has bounced on the wall of a society with certain values, as a result the experiences have been reshaped, reviewed, re-evaluated.

It is easier for me to use a definition to express that my view of knowledge is in all points, the opposite of the definition of objectivity. Bernstein (as cited in May, 2016), defines objectivity as “the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, a historical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness” (p.8).

There is not one truth but several truths as my interpretation of the world around me is unique to me.

There is not one way to measure these truths but many ways, many frameworks. An example of that is what I have explained above regarding looking at oppression with Freire’s lens or Young’s lens. How would I find a definition of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness in the first place?

Everyone holds their own knowledge, and I agree with Freire (1970) that universally, people have the power to produce their own knowledge.

Currently, the knowledge that is exposed is the one of people who have power and influence over others, what Gramsci defined as hegemony.

Antonio Francesco Gramsci (1891 - 1937), was an Italian Marxist philosopher and communist politician. He was arrested by the fascists in 1927 and wrote more than 30 notebooks while he was in prison. His main contribution to political theory is his theory of cultural hegemony, which describes how the state and ruling capitalist class use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies.

With this research I want to explore "how knowledge is produced and why some groups, more than others, are able to perpetuate their beliefs within society" (May, 2016, p.44).

### **My ways of knowing**

When I started this research, I did not realise that naming my world or looking at my views on knowledge would have an impact on my choice of research methods.

As a critical researcher, the research methods I have picked are my ways of knowing.

"I am outside myself all the time, and inside myself: the knower and the known" (Oakley, 2000, p.7). Describing what is happening at the same time as why and how and looking at it with a reflective lens, it is multi-directional and simultaneous. The lived experience makes the knowing.

When Humphreys (2005) talks about "overtly acknowledge my awareness" (p. 840), I suppose he is bringing me a step closer to becoming subjects of the research.

We can understand social reality through the experience of others. Knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue between individuals and through social activities.

In essence, "we learn in relationship to others" (Green, 2014, p. 154).

This is what qualitative research is all about.



## **THE COHERENT PART**

I have called this part the coherent part because this holds this work together. I am making sense of the research question and I am placing it in a context.

### **Why qualitative research?**

The context of my research has progressive views. I do not think the current educational system helps my children to become happy, fulfilled and critical of their world. I want to widen a vision for learning and education.

I want to talk about learning as a philosophy and practice to change, personal and social.

I am hoping that reflecting on my stories and the research participants will help me understand these alternatives or progressive views of learning.

"Qualitative research offers appropriate methodologies to gain understanding of and insight into the human qualities of an area or issue" (Bolton, 2010, p.31).

Qualitative research is about challenging the real and what is constructed, recognizing hidden powers of dominating discourses. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), the word research could even be replaced by the word inquiry to become:

a historical present that cries out for emancipatory visions, for visions that inspire transformative inquiries, and for inquiries that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle and resist oppression. The pursuit of social justice within a transformative paradigm challenges prevailing forms of inequality, poverty, human oppression and injustice. (p.1)

### **Elements of autoethnography**

When I started this work, autoethnography did not strike me as being a relevant method of inquiry for my research as I did not see the relevance in exposing and using my experiences in an academic work.

Indeed, searching for my view on knowledge and my strong belief in the value of the experience kept on bringing me to my own experiences. Since I can only validate my own learning through

action (Mezirow, 1991), accepting the value of my own experiences to expose alternative ways of learning that question learning, education, and the nature of knowledge, made sense.

“The genre of autoethnography allows for the personal and the autobiographical to as a legitimate site for research into self and culture...” (McCormack, 2009, p.13).

I did come across autoethnography early during the academic year but ignored it totally because this research was not about me, it was about other people’s views on something I felt strongly about.

McCormack (2009) sees autoethnography as a way to actively engage the reader in meaning making.

I am very passionate about my topic and that engagement is critical to my work as a researcher and educator.

When investigating learning, I need to investigate meaning and meaning making so elements of autoethnography are consistent with my research content.

In narrative inquiry in general, and autoethnography specifically, we believe we have come upon an approach to research that allows us to catch those subtle processes of human growth and transformation in a way that honours the richness and passion with which adults embrace their own growth and development. Autoethnography is, we believe, a method wholly congruent with adult education. (McCormack, O’Neill, Ryan, Walsh, 2005, p. 2)

This quote reassures me because I have been looking for congruence and authenticity for this work and did not know how to express it.

I do regret not having come across the autoethnography route earlier on. O Neill (2016) talks about:

The shift towards the personal and the acknowledgement of the presence of a biographically loaded, thinking, feeling researcher-writer in the inquiry space seemed like a significant break from a post-positivist-influenced anxiety about maintaining, at least, some sort of scientific objectivity. (p.15)

Coming across such readings half-way through the Masters course caused me a lot dis-orientation. I felt overwhelmed as the sense of having missed on something (autoethnography) caught me once again intellectually, emotionally and psychologically (Mezirow, 1997).

Autoethnography brought its own dilemma: these are my own stories and my own interpretations. It places myself as the expert of my own life, but I do not want to be in a position to judge reality and to pretend I can become an expert in other people's lives (May, 2016). My learning experience that expose alternative learning can be the beginning of research but could be situated within a wider context. I believe I can find this wider context by talking to other people.

I finally feel comfortable with the methods, with vignettes as the starting point for qualitative research and participants' interview for a wider context.

Vignettes can create an emotional identification from the reader (Humphreys, 2005). For me they are the ideal approach to representation and reflexivity as they are very emotionally driven.

Vignettes are like short stories that can bring out emotions to "bring life to research [and] bring research to life" (Ellis cited in Humphreys 2005 p.842).

However, they are very subjective, and I am not sure of what I have left behind? But the importance is their meaning, their anchor in a cultural, social and political environment and not so much their accuracy (Humphreys, 2005).

I know what I have left behind, there are my negative experience about learning. For sure I have learnt from them but for this research I want to focus on the positive where my learning was even more significant and impactful.

## **Research participants**

Here is another part of the research process that took a while to decide on. My research question was still work in progress because it depended on the clarity of (rather lack of) my research question.

However, one of the guideline I followed has a strong grounded theory element in it as I wanted to find ways "to get at varied constructions or competing definitions of the situation, as given in action, not merely stated in reconstructed accounts" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 180).

I took the participants' selection process methodically.

Knowledge comes from the ones who live it so, I had to find people whom I see true to the values of the learning model I want to talk about.

The education I am interested in is defined by strong views on education for social change and seem to be in line with the needs of community and adult education groups.

A philosophy of experience has strong roots in a humanistic vision of the world. Who promotes that ethos in an Adult Education context?

I decided to look at places and people with such visions, who talks about transformative education, who embodies the concepts of progressive learning and who makes learning spaces social and political spaces.

“Seeing research participants' lives from the inside often gives a researcher otherwise unobtainable views” (Charmaz 2006, p. 14).

I had a pre-selected list from the beginning of the Masters year of people I would like to talk to, as the research changed the list changed too.

However, no contact was made before I was sure that these were “suitable” participants for my research. There again, defining participants in terms of “suitable” or “not suitable” does not feel right! It feels like I value some people more than others based upon my subjective criteria and the knowledge I would like to get from them.

I have interviewed three participants.

The first participant introduced himself as a popular educator<sup>7</sup> at an event I attended, and I thought that talking to someone who embraces and lives for alternative education would be ideal for my research. He has extensive experience of working and teaching in Latin America, where popular education<sup>8</sup> finds its roots. He is also the leading specialist in popular education and Latin America in the UK and his published research and a book on this topic.

I need to mention here that I was aware of this participant’s commitment to Adult Education, but I did not realise the extent of this participant’s knowledge when I interviewed him. Had I known, I am not sure I would have interviewed him as I would have felt totally out of my depth and overwhelmed by his exhaustive knowledge (academic and practical) in my research areas, and my lack of same.

However, if I take a step back and put his participation in a real context of gathering useful knowledge, I was indeed very fortunate to be able to interview him.

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<sup>7</sup> The word popular has to be understood as the adjective for people or anything that works towards the interest of the people. A popular educator creates learning conditions for human liberation through awareness of social inequalities.

<sup>8</sup> A politically engaged pedagogy based on collective participation and aiming at a more equal and just society.

The second participant is a community development worker involved in the implementation of the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP). This programme has two goals, one to support community groups and one to support individuals with amongst other things, educational programmes.

I knew this participant from a course I was facilitating and that she was organising. I was interested in talking to this participant to look adult learning that impacts and has an impact on the community, in other words, learning for social change.

The third participant has started an alternative school twenty years ago, for early school leavers and mature learners, mainly from marginalised groups (low socio-economic backgrounds, single parent...) who want to achieve their Junior Certificate and Leaving certificate. The ethos of the school is strongly anchored in humanist values and the belief in shaping the teaching around learner's abilities, so the focus is on learning.

I need to mention here that I feel very humble acknowledging the level of knowledge and experience from the three participants. Years combined between them!

I made a note earlier on about the first participant, who impressed me because of the extent of his academic inputs. I was equally impressed about the knowledge of the second and third participant but, shamefully, I must admit that I the academic knowledge is the one that made me feel the least comfortable.

Probably a reflection of the fear of the academic world, once again!

I genuinely believe that I have talked to people who embody through vision and practice, the vision of education I am interested in. This is powerful. I am just hoping my work will reflect that!

### **Interview – the process with participants**

I have made an initial contact with each participant by phone to explain the nature of my research and seek for a participation consent in principle.

I have then followed with an email with a proposed date and day for the interview and attached the consent form.

The conversations have taken place by phone with the first and third participant and face-to-face with the second participant.

I have recorded the conversations and taken occasional notes of key words or ideas I wanted to expand on.

I am still not sure if the way I have asked questions is affecting the answers. I wanted open conversations to facilitate answers that reflect participants' realities. I wanted to avoid "loaded questions" that would force "responses into narrow categories", resulting "in forcing data in unwitting ways" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 18).

Even though I was prepared with semi-structured interviews, hoping to have "a greater say in focusing the conversation on issues that (I) deem important to the research project" (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 579), I started very wide and open by "How did it all start"?

I wanted to get a context to the findings (social, political, economic, emotional, personal).

I find this question positions the participant in the centre of the research, which I hope gives a high degree of truth to their own beliefs and authenticity.

I wanted to be a flowing conversation where I became a listener, not really wanting to interrupt (Brinkmann, 2018).

However, it is difficult to know whether the answers are a subject matter in their own right or an account occasioned by the situation (the interview). In other words, is the interview used as a social practice or as a research instrument? (Brinkman, 2018).

I suppose there is a bit of both!

I went through a wave of emotions during the interviews that have made this part of the research a specifically strong moment for me.

Before the interviews I felt anxious and quite intimidated.

Anxious, because I did not know which way things would go. I had a list of research questions for each participant. They were tailored according to themes I wanted to explore with each of them.

This bothered me because I was not sure if asking different questions would lead me to any consistency in the research and could back up my research question.

Additionally, I was getting anxious that this would open to too many themes, making my research very wide.

Intimidated because I had chosen to talk to people whom I identified as being experienced and "experts" in their field. They live the values and ideology I am interested in and I felt a bit like an impostor, not as knowledgeable and politically involved as they are.

During the interview, I was confused because I introduced myself differently to each of the participant. The subject of the researched remained the same, but I introduced myself differently to each participant in order to make a connection, a form of closeness or a form of friendship. This is probably showing that my identity as a researcher was not clear.

However, I also felt much more relaxed, everything they said made sense to me. I understood the words and I think I understood where they were coming from. I was listening to people naming their world. I was making meaning from their reality. Also, through my filter, I was making my own meaning of their reality.

The main feeling after each interview was one of powerlessness and disconnection.

This disconnection seems in contradiction with the closeness I have just mentioned earlier. I think I have understood their naming of the world, yet how do I make it an authentic discourse?

I have heard participants naming their world in terms of hegemony, powerlessness, discrimination, suffering within the educational system, adapting and changing all the time to secure their position...All I can do here is empathize and use this work to give them a voice.

Really angry and not so genuine, I sit in a comfortable chair and focus on my thesis when people dedicate their time, money and effort for the life of others, with no limitations.

This really upset me. I felt like a powerless observer.

So how can I change my view from being a powerless observer? This is what we mean by giving a voice, isn't it? Get the story out there.

I also felt very overwhelmed, I thought I had only reached the tip of the iceberg and really felt like a smash and grab situation. I felt I took something from my participants, knowledge, experience, know-how. I also felt like by introducing myself as a researcher, I took something from them without a clear commitment that I could give something back. I am not sure if they expect something back, but I feel I do have to give something back.

Finally, I had opted for a loose conversation hoping not to feel in a position of power but fundamentally I chose the topic, asked the questions, ended the conversation. I was in charge of the conversation and the agenda.

If qualitative research is insightful, looks for connections and emotions and hits people emotionally, I think I got hooked. Now I need to find out how to share my discomfort and unease, raise guilt and anger on my topic.

Do I want to keep a relationship with the participants?

I am trying to figure out if this is a question in the first place. I have mentioned before the smash-and-grab feeling and maintaining a relationship with the participants sounds like a good way to reduce that feeling. I could envisage to thank them again when I get my results for example.

Or I could decide to maintain the relationship in view of future research I may undertake.

However, the research participants have been contributors to a specific project that had defined objectives. I am not sure why I would want to stay in touch with them.

I have recorded the conversation, with the participants' agreement as per the consent form.

The findings have been produced under the form of written transcripts, a true encounter of the interview.

According to May (2016), "data are not collected but produced" adding that "facts do not exist independently of the medium through which they are interpreted, whether that is an explicit theoretical model, a set of assumptions, or pre-existing interests" (p.26).

I need to mention here that publications are available online for each participants' organisations, so I have additional information independently of participants' interviews.

Once typed, I have emailed the transcripts to each participant with the option to make any changes or/and remove some of the content.

Two participants made slight changes from the original transcripts on the form more so than the content. It made me realize how the written world is perceived, all powerful and definite.

### **The process with myself**

May (2016), explains that research is guided by the researcher's interest and values, as a result he explains that we make decisions on the methodology, "before" the research itself is conducted.

I can only explain my initial struggle and reluctance with this statement and the fact that I did not give much value to my voice initially with what Boal (1990) calls the "cop in the head". That internalized oppression or self-censorship we apply to ourselves. That critical voice that says you're afraid, you're not capable, you're just pretending...He puts this in the context of the ideas and the values we have absorbed from the dominating class.

Augusto Boal (1931 – 2009) was a Brazilian theater practitioner, drama theorist, and political activist. He was the founder of Theatre of the Oppressed. and has been influenced by the work of

Paolo Freire. Boal used theatre in a participatory way to engage the audience, "the oppressed", to reflect on their own conditions.

In this instance, the main dominating values I was fighting against were, the value of my own voice versus the research participants lived experience in academic work, and the value of my own writing versus the academic audience who is going to engage with it.

bell hooks (1994), in the context of her work not being scholarly enough or not being theoretical enough for the world of academia, has identified herself as a "feminist theorist(s) creating work that acts as a catalyst for social change across false boundaries".

Judging by the positive feedback she gets from readers and minority groups, she wants "to testify, to let you know from firsthand experience that all our feminist theory directed at transforming consciousness, that truly wants to speak with diverse audiences, does work: this is not a naive fantasy" (p.72).

When I accepted that I could create empathy and hit people emotionally with my stories, when I decided to expose the research participant's lived experiences and make their issues is a social issue, I got rid of that "cop in the head", I felt liberated (and it even made some of the actual writing exercise easier!). I think this meets Richardson & St Pierre (2005) when they claim to have "altered the primary research question from "how to write during the crisis of representation to how to document becoming" (p. 826).

I am now finally at peace and satisfied to combine elements of autoethnography and research participants' input in a meaningful way, in quest for useful knowledge.

## **Reflexivity**

I am very tempted to say that my work is highly reflexive because I am using vignettes and I am probably under the assumption that unveiling myself and deciding to share my own life experiences is being reflexive. I thought the immediacy of my voice was enough.

Reflexivity can be seen as "a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself" (Lincoln et al 2005, p. 210).

I suppose choosing elements of autoethnography and engaging in the process of writing do engage in the process of discovery of the self and promote the process of discovery, which is reflexivity.

I also see my reflexivity in this work as the process of exposing concerns that are universal: human suffering and happiness, social equalities and consciousness.

## **Ethics**

The ethics of a critical pedagogue is based on solidarity, making the struggle of the participants my own struggle. My ethics imply being able to reason differently and accept other opinions. It is a form of rigidity and flexibility at the same time. Rigidity and discipline to be open enough and flexibility to accept new opinions.

I initially looked at ethics dismissively and thought I could get away with few lines. I could not see how, as stated by May (2016), “Values do not simply affect some aspect of research, but all aspects of research” (p. 56).

I thought I could step out of my values or leave them aside.

I come from a business environment where I would look for forgiveness rather than permission. Before I started this research, I associated ethics with my personal view of the world, the right and wrong type of debate. I did not envisage ethics in relation with others, in relation of the impact that my ethics have on others, what they say, how they say it, how I have asked questions...I did not realize that I had to negotiate my identity as a researcher.

I had not defined ethical issues in terms of risk. Risk for the participants, for myself, risk of misinterpreting the data and interpreting with too much subjectivity. Also, the risk of misinforming participants on the purpose of the research or risk that the research will have different aims once the interview has been carried (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

I have used the consent form (Appendix 1) in order to (1) explain what the study is about and made clear some of my bias and interests by explaining that I wanted to explore transformative learning, so this research is not neutral, it is political and hopes to make a difference, (2) detail the way the interview will be carried and recorded and what is going to happen with the thesis once finished, (3) give a choice of anonymity asking participants to decide whether they wanted to be named and want their organization to be named or not, (4) I have also produced a consent form for my children (appendix 2) as I have asked them many times for their input and ideas.

I have decided to ask them to sign a consent form to give me the right to mention their experiences in my research. Indeed, I have respected their choices not to mention some of the experiences we had discussed. However, it is hard to undo and forget what has been said. Some of these unwritten experiences have been used to fuel my own reflective thoughts and imagination.

I have tried to figure out how I would feel if I was talking part in my research.

It was a good idea to start with an open question and let the participant explain their context.

Even though I had a list of questions, I have used the participants answers to ask probing questions and to avoid breaking the flow of conversation. Even if I am aware of the “interviewer monopoly of interpretation over the interviewee’s statements” (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 589), I also think that carrying interviews is good ethically as I have listened to the interviewee’s voice and hope to use that voice to theorise and problematise issues relevant a social concern.

I realise now that, had I neglected a reflection on ethics, as I was initially tempted to do! I could have seriously compromised the value of my work. For me personally, in terms of my values and beliefs but also since this is a publishable document, it could compromise the value of participants’ experiences and make my findings irrelevant or worse not reliable.

The next part are my vignettes, my stories, the “go to” place for future or past reflection and analysis. What does learning mean to me?

## THE STORIES

### **Playing with my grandparents**

My very first experience of learning, is one of learning through play.

My grandparents used to mind me when I was young, and I remember spending hours with them just playing. Role playing was constant. My granny used to keep the packaging of the medicine she was taking so I'd have a shelf full of boxes and small containers. She was the patient and I was the doctor.

She was singing a lot of songs too that I still remember. Old songs with funny rhymes and stories.

With my grandfather, we used to play cards and I have learnt how to count that way. He is probably the one who taught me how to tie my shoelaces too!

My grandparents used to speak a different language to French, a mix between Spanish, Catalan and Latin, I was able to understand them by listening. I have never read or written these words, but I can still understand it fully! The list could go on...

Playing in my grandparents' home has been the bedrock of my learning. It saddens me to write this last sentence because I have never thanked them for teaching me so much. I do not think I ever saw the value (up until the transformative experience of the HDip and the Masters), of the learning that took place with them, in their house.

Interestingly, I have set up a toy business based on the belief that learning can be encouraged through play. I also share Gray's (2013) definition of play as being self-chosen, self-directed and unstructured in the sense that it is structured by the children themselves, so it is just free play. Such a learning environment created by play can develop future passions and our skills which has been my case.

This is what learning means to me.

A loving and caring environment. I knew things that were not measured or even measurable! or desired. It just happened. That learning is my identity.

## **An organised chaos**

Last year, I showcased some of the toys I sell as part of a Free Family Event on STEM<sup>9</sup> activities in a local GAA gymnasium in Cork. The main objective was to engage families, so parents and children of all ages with activities that had a scientific, technical, engineering and mathematical element in them. Stall holders included public bodies such as Irish Waters, the Gardai, National Schools and private organisations.

We all had a physical space, either floor space and/or tables to facilitate hands-on activities and demonstrations to encourage visitors' participation and interest in the STEM topics.



*The Great Circus by Marc Chagall<sup>10</sup> (1984)*

I have decided to use this painting to help you relive this experience with me, through my eyes (Humphreys, 2005) and hopefully feel how I felt.

I felt busy and chaotic, a bit like a circus but where everyone seems to know what they are doing without being told. It looks messy, yet there is a form of harmony, an organised mess that I find fascinating and relaxing. It looks like anyone could swap and change positions and still do something engaging without being judged. The colours are spectacular, there is life, vibrancy and movement, perpetuity and longevity.

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<sup>9</sup> STEM is an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. Even if STEM subjects are a fantastic way to understand how the world works, the Department of Education has made these disciplines a priority in most primary and secondary schools under the pretence that they will drive jobs and expand the economy. All done at the expense of critical thinking and arts subjects.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Chagall (1887 – 1985) was a Russian-French artist, who, according to Picasso, was the only artist to understand colours!

Learning took place there in this burst of colours, energy and motivation. It was a social, collective and non-competitive atmosphere.

There was no authority or instructions, the knowledge was self-produced, co-produced and welcomed.

## **Did I learn English?**

### ***“Don’t you want me” (The Human League<sup>11</sup>, 1981)***

*You were workin' as a waitress in a cocktail bar*

*When I met you*

*I picked you out, I shook you up and turned you around*

*Turned you into someone new*

*Now five years later on, you've got the world at your feet*

*Success has been so easy for you*

*But don't forget, it's me who put you where you are now*

*And I can put you back down too*

*Don't, don't you want me?*

*You know I can't believe it when I hear that you won't see me*

*Don't, don't you want me?*

*You know I don't believe you when you say that you don't need me*

*It's much too late to find*

*You think you've changed your mind*

*You'd better change it back or we will both be sorry*

*Don't you want me, baby?*

*Don't you want me? Oh*

*Don't you want me, baby?*

*Don't you want me? Oh*

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<sup>11</sup> The Human League are a British pop band formed in 1977. This song became a number one in the UK/US charts in 1981 and was my first introduction to the English-speaking world.

*I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar  
That much is true  
But even then, I knew I'd find a much better place  
Either with or without you  
The five years we have had have been such good times  
I still love you  
But now, I think it's time I live my life on my own  
I guess it's just what I must do*

*Don't, don't you want me?  
You know I can't believe it when I hear that you won't see me  
Don't, don't you want me?  
You know I don't believe you when you say that you don't need me  
It's much too late to find  
You think you've changed your mind  
You'd better change it back or we will both be sorry*

*Don't you want me, baby?  
Don't you want me? Oh  
Don't you want me, baby?  
Don't you want me? Oh*

*Don't you want me, baby?  
Don't you want me? Oh  
Don't you want me, baby?  
Don't you want me? Oh  
Don't you want me, baby?  
Don't you want me? Oh  
Don't you want me, baby?  
Don't you want me? Oh  
Don't you want me, baby?  
Don't you want me? Oh  
Don't you want me, baby?  
Don't you want me? Oh*

*Don't you want me? Oh*

*Don't you want me, baby?*

This is taking a lot of page space, but it is worth it. This particular song is important to me. I have always loved British pop music as a young teenager I immersed myself in English speaking songs. The words meant nothing to me as English is not my mother tongue.

However, to date, I still cannot say that I have learnt English.

First of all because I am still learning and do not see an end to this process, secondly because I can only remember what it meant to me and what it did to me.

I have occulted the learning by heart of vocabulary and texts for exams (this is the part of research that is left behind, as mentioned before in auto-ethnography!).

I suppose in this case what I am leaving behind is what Mezirow (2015) calls instrumental learning, the one that can be measured and proves my performance but not does not really engage me in critical thinking.

I felt a connection between my life and my school going years. Or to say it differently it was the first time I was engaging with a school subject because it made sense to my life (outside of school).

This is what learning means to me.

I was engaged with this knowledge emotionally, personally and intellectually, I was visceral! This learning acknowledges my lived experience and is completely interest led.

### **The HDip and Masters or when I thought I was clued in**

When I enrolled for the HDip course three years ago, I did not know what adult education was and what adult learning meant. It is not the first time I have made up hazard decisions in terms of my education so I did not mind. I was considering a career change then and thought my skills and interests matched the course, or vice-versa!

When I say I thought I was clued in, I meant that I could manoeuvre in this world and make the most out of it. I also thought I knew enough to do so. What I was expecting from the HDip course was a set of new skills and a qualification.

What I was not prepared for, was stepping into a learning space that was political, inquiry-based and critical with a strong philosophical and ideological background close to Marxism.

I mentioned earlier that I rejected instrumental learning (Mezirow, 2015) in my experience of learning English, in favour of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938). In the episode I am describing, I recognise that the elements of instrumental learning, of all these new knowledges and philosophies of learning and seeing the world that I have discovered during the HDip and Masters course, have only been a necessary stepping stone for me to start thinking critically about learning and education. I have found because of that, new ways to make meaning of the world around me and to problematise my world (Freire, 1970).

I suppose my choice of doing the Masters was two-fold, first to avoid this stagnation and isolation I find myself in, and secondly to reflect, connect and expose my concerns (Mezirow, 1991).

This learning pictures the complexity of learning within an educational context that is political and engaged with social action (Freire, 1970), in a formal learning environment.

*You can never step into the same river; for new waters are always flowing on you. No man ever steps into the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.*

*Heraclitus*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Heraclitus (c. 535 – c. 475 BCE) was a Greek philosopher, famous for his contribution to the philosophical concept of becoming. I came across this quote on Facebook and am not sure if this is the correct translation, but it does evoke well the notion of permanent change.

I have enjoyed using these vignettes.

They are, I hope, evocative of my experiences with learning. They are what learning has made me. They also are a way to “acknowledge my awareness that I am an actor in my own life production” (Gray cited in Humphreys 2005, p. 840).

They reinforce the authenticity and identity of my research and my own.

I am also establishing my dependence as a researcher as I am asking readers to connect with me and participate in my life (Humphreys, 2005).

My stories also reflect a process of transformation that is leaving me in a lonely space, hard to describe, but I feel there is a lack of connection with others who may not have the same mindset and this really gets me to question learning for change when I find the space I am in, quite isolating. Or, as explained by Hoggan, Mälkki & Finnegan (2016), “the demand to invent and reinvent oneself to be endlessly flexible leads to atomization, loneliness, and a felt lack of solidarity” (p. 52), which may end up having opposite objectives to what emancipatory<sup>13</sup> learning should be about.

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13 Emancipatory learning creates the conditions to act upon oppressions with a view to change society to a more egalitarian one.

## TRANSITION

I spoke at the beginning of this work about how concerned I was about the width of my research and that maybe I would have to look at topics such as informal learning or formal learning, learning for social change or learning for the self, experiential and transformative learning and learning as a political act.

My vignettes seem to have exposed most of these elements and have been a mean to “explicitly question and highlight pertinent thoughts and emotional experiences” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 853).

However, there seem to be a missing link here, I have explained my choice of using vignettes, but I am struggling to tie this in with a discussion in the broader or a more analytical and theoretical context. What’s next?

So far, I have used my voice and I am now engaging in a discussion with theories and theorists that have influenced my research.

It is both exciting and nerve wrecking to use someone else’s voice and to negotiate with someone else’s voice. I don’t know how to do that.

I have explained previously the reasons why my research has a strong autoethnographic element and could not exist without it, so we are looking at the studied world through my eyes. Now I am looking at it academically and through someone else’s eyes.

Charmaz (2006) explains that the strength of grounded theory is the constant back and forth between data and analysis, so back to the field for further data and generate new analysis.

This allows movement in the research, for me some flexibility.

According to Denzin (2014), autoethnography has been criticised and dismissed for being non-analytical, lacking reliability, too artful or not artful enough, being badly written and lacking scientific inquiry, amongst many criticisms. Denzin reckons that “The goal is not to produce a standard social science article. The goal is to write performance texts in a way that moves others to ethical action“ (p. 3).

Denzin (2014) establishes that this form of writing and its criticisms raise the fundamental questions of who has the right to speak and what and whose knowledge is represented?

My main concern here is how to make the transition to reflection and ethical action? To a two-way conversation with the literature? How do I validate this work? How do I make it useful knowledge?

The first point for me is that elements of autoethnography such as vignettes, my experiences justify themselves because they locate myself as an individual, within a social context. Denzin (2014) sees the experiential as “a form of social criticism that no longer seeks validation in scientific discourse” (p. 14).

What are the criteria to evaluate my personal writing as sociological subjects?

According to Denzin (2014), they are to challenge taken for granted assumptions and give a voice to a minority or silenced group, to expose the cracks of the dominating discourse, to engage dialectically with the self to generate social criticism and a form of resistance, to help people imagine how things could be different.

What learning means to me, it has been hugely experiential and contributed to changing my perspectives. It has prepared me to change and is in the process of preparing me for change.

It has not been completely the result of teaching and exposes other learning spaces.

I situate that learning within a social context where knowledge can only be questioned.

# THE TALK

## Learning

### 1 -The power of the experience

According to Dewey (1938), a worthy experience is one that can be used for further learning and progression. One that is harmony with personal growth and social emancipation.

John Dewey (1859-1952) was an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer who believed that human beings learn through a 'hands-on' approach. He believed that learning was from doing and that reality had to be experienced. His work and ideas have influenced other thinkers in the field of adult learning like Paolo Freire and Jack Mezirow.

The whole purpose of the experience is to validate the relationship between what we make of the world we live in and how we decide to react to it. If we follow Dewey, we see experiences integrated with one another and as instruments to understand what is coming next.

When talking about the value of the experience in learning or experiential learning (Dewey 1938), we are talking about a hands-on learning. This learning is not about learning for the future a preparation for the future by making sense of present experiences.

Jack Mezirow is another thinker who values the experience. Jack Mezirow (1923-2014) was an American sociologist and chairman of the Department of Higher and Adult Education and Professor of Adult and Continuing Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He has influenced the world of adult learning by developing a philosophy called "Transformative Learning".

Like Dewey, Mezirow (1991) recognizes the experience as the starting point for learning and explains transformative learning as a series of steps that takes a new experience through a our current views and beliefs, to decide whether we can or not deal with this new experience given our current belief, that leads to a reflective discourse.

Mezirow (2007) sees learning is a process of challenging personal values which he has called transformative learning. He recognizes our ability to challenge our values, assumptions and points of view by changing an old interpretation through experience, into a new interpretation.

Experiences allow to ground the learning, by the ability to learn from mistakes or by accepting interventions or by being intimately interested and involved with the subject, true learning is not

forced. In fact, according to Gray (2018), we possess the biological foundations for self-directed education. Learning and questioning things is what we naturally do. It is creative, sensory, not rushed or forced, intense, self-initiated, self-directed, and self-evaluated. Gray (2018) explains that self-directed education is the self-chosen of the learner,

A subject is only educational if it is based on learners' needs and capacities. This makes learning relevant, useful and generates knowledge necessary to understand and deal with future situations (Dewey 1938).

So far, talking about the experiential learning has mirrored how I have learnt and why I still want to learn.

For Freire, interrogating the experience is the starting point of becoming aware or critical of the world around so acknowledging the experience will reveal existing knowledge.

Freire (1970) sees reflection essential to action when he says that “in dialectical thought, world and action are intimately interdependent. But action is human when it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation, that is, when it is not dichotomized from reflection” (p. 35).

I feel that the stories I have shared with my vignettes are a reflection of learning moments where I have dealt with the present, where there was a connection between my life and the subject learnt. I never felt learning was imposed rather I drove it. Was there a critical element? Yes and no. Yes because I am now doing this research, so I am in a critical space. Not directly because each experience I suppose has brought me to that critical space. The critical reflection for me feels like a muscle I have always had but needs developing and nurturing. I will discuss later on critical thinking.

None of my learning moments have taken place in a solitary environment. What I would like to introduce now is learning as a social process.

## **2 - A social process**

“Vygotsky (1934) suggested that learning was enhanced when learners interacted with each other in a social zone (ZPD)”. (Kenny, Hynes 2009, p.2).

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian psychologist who believed that social interaction plays a critical role in children's learning and promote a continuous process of learning. The notion of the

"zone of proximal development" has become a central component in educational psychology and practice.

Dewey (1938) clearly defines the interaction between learning and experience as a social process. "The principle that development of experience comes about through interaction means that education is essentially a social process" (p. 58).

This process works through participation in social inquiry, dialogue between groups or people and knowledge sharing. This model of learning which is collective requires an understanding and acknowledgement on the nature of the relationship between people.

If through tended to focus on the results of relations rather than on the relations themselves, it would lead to a fragmented or partial consciousness, or way of thinking, that prevented people from forming a true understanding of their reality. (Allman, 1999, p.38)

All human experience is social, involves contact and communication as a result, it contributes to conscience raising or critical awareness.

Mezirow (1991) emphasizes the importance of social context and prompts us to reflect on our assumptions in terms of communication with someone. Assumptions, which are likely to be reviewed, renewed and regenerated are also the fruit of our understanding of what someone else is saying, how they are saying it, what words are used, in what context.

Freire (1970) and Gramsci (1971) have also drawn our attention to the importance of words and language to pass on knowledge and being able to name the world. For Freire (1970), we cannot be spectator of our world, we have to be re-creator, we have to be with the world, not in the world. For Freire (1970), it's only through communication that "human life hold meaning" (p.58).

The thinking that is concerned with reality needs communication and interaction (Freire 1970).

Mezirow (2015) encourages us to share our needs and concerns, in a democratic way. For him, we live in a learning society and learning does not stop at school. Mezirow sees learning as an individual process, however it works best within a group (Rogers 1969, Mezirow 1991).

When mentioning learning society, it is important to note that the learning society we talk about is not the one of measurable and graded learning, but the one of the context defined above of learning in terms of exposure and response to experiences.

Illich (2018) embraces learning as a social process when he claims that learning is “the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing and caring” and highlights like Dewey that learning as an activity of the present, that happens casually. He adds that learning is mainly done outside of a classroom environment. He makes learning an activity that happens naturally and that has nothing to do with the activity of teaching.

He also adds that:

In fact, learning is the human activity which least needs manipulation by others. Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. Most people learn best by being "with it". (p.39)

We have discussed some assumptions that indeed, we live in a learning society where each individual want to participate in social inquiry, as part of their individual learning process, where the learner has an intention and an interest to learn and where individuals are involved themselves in the learning.

As I reflect on my stories, the learning that has made me progress is the result of social interactions and my own intentions. One thing is sure, their dialectical nature is making me more and more aware of the world around me.

“Dialogue belongs to the nature of human beings, as beings of communication. Dialogue seals the art of knowing, which is never individual, even though it has its individual dimension” (Shor and Freire, 1987, p.3).

What I would like to find out now is the context of this learning. How can we make an experiential and social learning happen?

### **3 - Thinking learning “outside the box”**

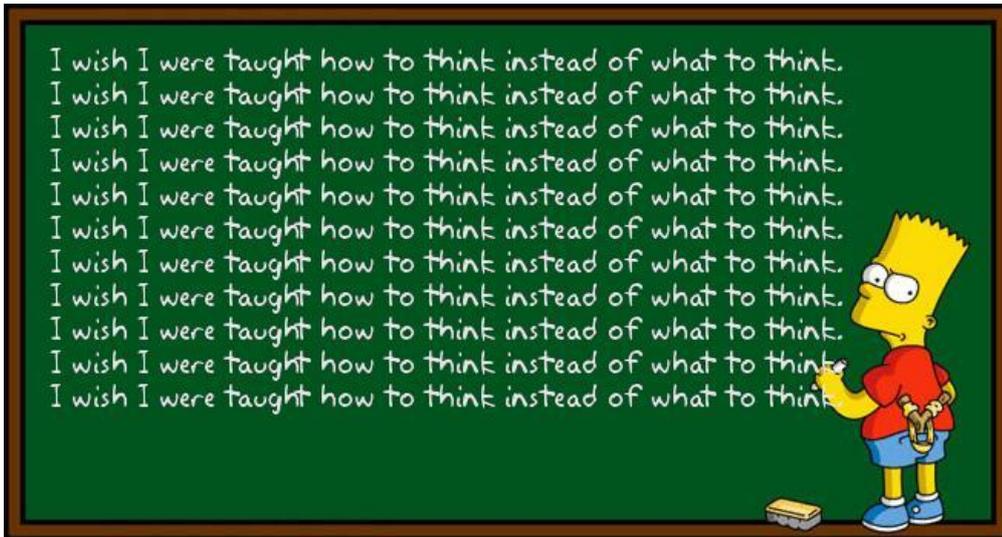
We all agree that, young children are very good at displaying tons of imagination and hands-on learning. They make learning look like a fun, enjoyable, ever-lasting, ingrained process that make them enjoy life and live it in the present, which makes their future possible. Rogers (1969) calls this “significant or experiential learning” (p. 5).

What happens when we become adults?

My children, like most children, had a page long of what they wanted to do or what they wanted to be when they grow up. Fireman? Teacher? Astronaut? Vet?

Now, as they are entering university courses, they barely know what they want to do. Nothing seems possible. Where is that passion and that energy gone? What happens in schools?

I agree with Rogers (1969), when he states that “A sad part of most education is that by time the child has spent a number of years in school this intrinsic motivation is pretty well dampened” (p.131).



For me, there is a complete disjoint between personal growth and education. I feel my children are trapped with other people’s thoughts and values. Learning has been annihilated, as stated by Rogers (1969), “Yet in the vast majority of our schools, at all educational levels, we are locked into a traditional and conventional approach which makes significant learning improbable if not impossible” (p. 5).

Where does this creativity and spontaneity go when we become adult learners, or maybe it is still there but the learning process has to be adapted?

For Rogers too (1969), self-directed learning with possibilities to make decisions for ourselves is the realisation of our uniqueness. Our identity.

Am I talking agency? Possibly...freedom definitely. We know what’s best for us. Rogers (1969) talks about the freedom of the subjective person, “a freedom which he courageously uses to live his potentiality” (p. 269).

However, this identity is defined in terms of power relations and social relations defined gender, class, ethnicity...

For Freire and Shor (1987), motivation takes part in the action of learning, not before, not outside. Part of understanding motivation is “to establish learners’ current knowledge and motivation for what and against what” (p.6).

This statement puts learning in the context of education for emancipation and learning for social awareness and action against oppression. This learning has a strong social and political engagement. I have mentioned in the early pages of this document my reluctance to be political, to become engaged. I am still struggling to reconcile learning for social or political action.

However, I am wondering if it is realistic to talk about learning without talking about equal society or power structures?

Murray (2013) is critical of the type of learning that has an over reliance of the individual with a false sense of emancipation. He warns us that not all learning is emancipatory and not all emancipatory learning will lead to social action. He argues that knowing how to be critical does not mean people will take action and become activists in various areas.

The individual must become aware of its own existence and the power relations, through a dialectical process. We have established earlier on the dialectical nature of learning.

What’s missing? According to Murray, it is the lack relevant acknowledgement of power structures and social and political relationships that prevents learning to reach its goal.

Illich (2018) claims that "The discovery that most learning requires no teaching can be neither manipulated nor planned" (p. 47), it reminds me of the intrinsically nature of learning that we have discussed earlier, the fact that learning happens anywhere and all the time and to make sense, has to tie in with our experiences.

However, like Freire, Illich makes learning a political engagement by making school a space for political and social powers.

According to Illich (2018), school teaches the need to be taught and follow the hidden agenda of the ruling classes.

What happens then is a dependence on schools, a suspicion about anything that is not taught in schools, primarily knowledge, and a suspicion about anyone or any institution that does not teach following a defined and known teaching or schooling model. In fact, this goes beyond suspicion as any alternative initiatives are kept silent and any other forms of learning are being ignored (Todd, 2012).

I would like to find out now if there are learning spaces that offer motivating, self-chosen and dialectically constructed learning and that reduce and decentralise the monopoly of knowledge that schools pretend to have (Todd, 2012).

#### **4 - Thinking learning outside of school, can we?**

Livingstone (2006) definition of informal learning “is any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge, or skill that occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricula criteria” (p.206). My picture of this definition is the “organised chaos” in Cork described in one of my vignettes earlier on.

As adults, what learning do we value that was not acquired within a formal educational context? Can you think of sets of skills and knowledge that you have, probably use every day, and for which you have no qualifications or certificates, and no teacher?

Parenting for many of us, is a big one – ongoing, changing every day and changing according to each child, so very adaptable and not based on one truth. It is not a set of skills or knowledge that fits us all.

Did I learn parenting? Yes, because I envisage learning as being stimulating, ongoing, intentional, self-directed, meaningful and needs driven. It is casual and deals with ad-hoc experiences. It’s not a measurable product, an end or a commodity (Dewey, 1938; Illich, 2018).

Rogers (2003) claims that we, as adults, learn all the time. We have to accept that and stop thinking of learning in terms of time, money, space or qualifications.

He has identified life changes that affect our learning and to understand this learning we need to understand the categories of life changes. He has defined three categories, social context, occupation and ourselves. By emphasizing that the learning process involved in dealing with our role in society (being a parent for example), dealing with our jobs and how we become individuals, is different to the process of schools or formal learning, he meets what we have just discussed in terms of learning seen as experiential and as a practice of freedom.

Additionally, Rogers (2003) makes us aware of the construct and identity of the adult learner. The tutor and learning conditions have to promote the adult identity in the learner and not the student identity of the adult. Here we are exploring learning as an approach and a goal.

A mean and an end. The end being the acceptance that the informal learning that goes on in our lives shape our identities. Understanding how adults learn outside the classroom, with learning

being self-directed and socially constructed, and learners responsible for their own learning, can bring valuable elements to learning programmes (Rogers, 2003).

The pursuit of the understanding of knowledge and skills, in other words, informal learning, is lifelong and lifewide.

What spaces foster this learning?

According to Livingstone (2006), informal learning settings are not necessarily recognised by the state, spaces where self-education take place is totally overlooked and not taken into consideration. Yet, these spaces gather a level of wisdom and knowledge, mainly local knowledge that can have a critical impact on society.

Crowther's (2014), article introduction gives us a mouth-watering idea of the learning spaces we can envisage: learning through self-help manuals, through play with children (where children do transmit knowledge to parents), family learning or parenting and finally the workplace.

There are other places like trade-union or museums, but this gives a good idea of the potential for knowledge generation.

I suppose recognising this knowledge is recognising another form of knowledge, one that is not imposed and one that is not the voice of a ruling class.

Livingstone sees the facilitation of spaces for self-directed learning to an agenda-less environment for open discussions on social justice, inclusion or any subject that is relevant, concerned and concerning with people's lives. However, people will not recognise informal learning unless they are asked to reflect on what they have learnt, which would be one key difference with formal schooling.

If, according to Livingstone (2006), participation in informal learning is not discriminated by sex, class, income, ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds...this begs a vision for learning, that is natural, accessible by all, intentional, relevant to people's lives so with knowledge co-produced and not limited to an organised surrounding. A learning that could make a difference and lead to social transformation.

This space becomes critical and dialectical and allows for people to participate in democratic life, discuss their concerns, gain new knowledge, think differently, ask new questions and dissect the answers (Kane, 2014).

However, Mayo (2012) warns us that self-directed learning puts all responsibilities on the learner and not on the state. Learning on its own is too individualistic and will not lead to a form of learning that transforms and aims at emancipation, freedom and democracy.

Elements of learning, like learning competences for example, are an individual process but other elements of learning have to engage the individual in the collective to get equipped to establish social justice and democracy (Mayo, 2012).

It reminds me of Illich's (2018) learning networks definition, where anyone who wants to learn regardless of ages and stage of life should have access to education and knowledge, where public spaces are created for peer learning and for people to share ideas and skills.

I have a feeling that this discussion drags the humanist tint I have identified in my ontology and seems to be taking over the discussion so far.

At this point, I need to remind myself very simply and clearly that, "humanistic adult education is a person-centred approach that supports individual change. Critical (or radical) education is a more collective approach that supports social and structural change" (Fitzsimons, 2017 p. 104).

My humanistic assumptions are that: (1) that people are essentially good, (2) that each of us has the freedom to choose, (3) that we all have the potential to succeed, that the self is at the core of our being, a self that can be nurtured and can grow and (4) that we each carry personal responsibility" (Fitzsimons, 2017, p.104).

What are my critical education assumptions? Discussing adult learning means discussing the context of power and culture. Formal curricula are dehumanizing and reproduce the dominant culture and acts as a form of social control (Freire, 1970).

However, according to Mayo (2012), the new trends of learning we have just discussed "do not fundamentally alter the epistemological politics of educational institutions" (p. 485).

He also adds that "the educative potential of "other" spaces in public and private life are devalued and obscured. The logic of this process is that institutional borders are being redrawn rather than withdrawn" (p. 485).

It is probably time to ask what does education do then?

## **Education**

Education can be many things to different people, based on my experiences, I have chosen to look at education as I see it now. A tool for learning.

### **1 - The environment**

We have looked at learning that takes place in multiple locations and is not necessarily associated with schools or formal education. What is that space we call education?

Giroux (as cited in Allman, 1999), defines education as:

a cultural pedagogical practice takes place across multiple sites, which include not only schools and universities but also the mass media, popular culture, and other public spheres, and signals how within diverse contexts, education makes us both subjects of and subject to relations of power. (p. xi)

Dewey (1938) sees education as providing an environment for dealing with the experience that arises in the present. Schools must represent the present life and promote skills and knowledge that have a "vital appeal" for learners. Therefore, that develop a "desire to go on learning" (p. 48).

For Dewey education is the constant reorganisation and reconstruction of experience. In fact, progressive education needs "a philosophy of education based upon a philosophy of experience. The philosophy in question is one of education of, by, and for experience" (p29).

According to Dewey, "The new education emphasizes "the freedom of the learner" and "freedom of intelligence". Education has to create free, creative...human beings, to allow them to follow those natural instincts. Rogers (1969) talks about a space "to think unusual thoughts without being squelched" (p. 200).

Nel Noddings (1992) believes that the "main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving and lovable people" (p.8).

For Mezirow the principles of education lead to growth, development with curiosity, initiative and reconstruction of experience.

Education is here described as a space that promote humanistic values of trust, respect care with a belief in the human being potential.

The education in question is one of the mind and heart and should social, emotional and ethical learning. It has a great belief on human abilities, sense of self, humanity and love, willing to help others, care and compassionate. (Freire, Mezirow, Rogers).

What about the relations of power?

## **2 - The process**

Looking at education necessitates to look at methods and ideologies.

For a philosophy of experience to become a philosophy of education, it needs to decide on subject matter, methods, organisation of the school, material equipment and working out social relationships (Dewey 1938).

If education is really a process of learning, should we not talk about “education-by-all” instead of “education-for-all?”, where oppression becomes the subject of reflection (Freire, 1970).

For Freire education should consist of acts of knowing and not transfer of information.

He sees this in the context of what he calls problem-posing education where:

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, a transformation (Canestrani & Marlowe, 2010, p. 210).

Mezirow, however, sees problem posing as a “meaning scheme being rendered problematic” (p. 33), the ultimate goal being problem-solving. As a result, he defines problem solving as central to the learning.

Ledwith (2001) warns us not to dichotomise thought and reality, process and content as this may result in accepting “prevailing conditions are accepted as natural and inevitable”, which reinforces inequalities and an acceptance for power and privilege. Allman talks about a “dialectical unity” between process and content.

So we both need consciousness and education for transformation. Education then becomes a crucial element in the process of social transformation which involves individuals transforming themselves in the process of collectively transforming society. There is a constant dialogue between process or pedagogy (Freire) and knowledge (Gramsci).

Mayo (2012) sees "critical adult education to analyze issues systematically and collectively with learners in order to develop a coherent vision for reconstruction" (p. 1).

However, he has identified a misuse of dialogical education in order to use the data of learners to identify their profiles for better social control. Nevertheless, he reinforces the idea of education as reading and transforming the world together with constant construction, reconstruction and critique of the world around.

This establishes education as the ground for political discourse, this is not a neutral place (Freire). The educational space is the right space to raise questions on oppression and inequalities as all the moral and political values of society are contained within that space.

Gramsci (1971) sees school as "designed to develop in each individual human being..., the fundamental power to think and ability to find one's way of life" (p. 26).

He further describes that school "should aim to insert young men and women into social activity after bringing them to a certain level of maturity, of capacity for intellectual and practical creativity, and of autonomy of orientation and initiative" (p. 29).

Learners should learn in schools what the world is like in order to be able to change it and enhances many skills that are impossible to assess through a standardised test: maturity, creativity, autonomy! He also sees the individual developing an independent responsibility with "intellectual self-discipline" and "moral independence" (p. 32).

Most views on the purpose of adult education is to break the limited and instrumental side of formal education by locating the learner in a social context rather than an individual one.

Crowther's (2010) definition is a good summary:

individual fulfilment is combined with the larger demands of solidarity and concern for the public good. "Socialized individualism", therefore involves engagement in forms of learning and action through participation in civic associations and organizations and the role of education is to foster this (p. 486).

Here, we are not talking about rejecting an old educational philosophy by building the strength of a new one.

However, according to Mezirow 1991, "Adult learning transforms meaning perspectives, not society". He also adds that "education is the handmaiden of learning, not of politics; but significant

learning, in involving personal transformations, is a social process with significant implications for social action” (p. 208).

Looking back at my own experiences, they do not really fit in the traditional formal education philosophy with rows of desks, books, teachers and my assumed ignorance (Freire). An ignorance widely defined in terms of knowledge, skill set, habits or disposition.

I believe that the education I have experienced is close to Mezirow’s definition and has therefore given me the knowledge and skills (1) to enrol in a transformative course such as the Masters (2) to become critical of the world around me and (3) to become involved in social actions.

If we accept that education is a tool for learning, whether it is learning for social action or personal change. We need to make sense of knowledge and the nature of knowledge that is generated in that context.

## **Knowledge**

### **1 - What is knowledge?**

I would like to start this discussion with some thoughts on knowledge which are the closest to me and my experience. Illich (2018), see knowledge as a merchandise because it is measured and measurable. The knowledge I value the most is the one I did not get qualifications for and it is the one that has made me change. Knowledge is not a possession or an end and is not the ownership of teachers or schools (Illich, 2018).

Allman (1999) claims that " Knowledge can only become a commodity in relation to people if some of those people, what they are, are determined by their possession of knowledge and others by their needs for it" (p.55).

Are we saying that a different knowledge exists for people who come from lower classes or marginalised groups?

“Some knowledge is given more value than others.”, however, using critical inquiry can produce a “parallel education and “dissenting knowledge” (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 9).

So rather than going for transference knowledge, where teachers pass on some information, Shor suggests we encourage an inquiry-based knowledge. We want people to be able to see the world and name it.

Freire sees knowledge creation in the relationship tutor-learner.

I suppose to understand the power that knowledge holds it is a good idea to look at Freire's definition of "banking education" (Freire 1970).

Banking education leads to believe that we are adaptable when in fact we are just obedient, empty vases that can be filled in by any substance. Banking education is dehumanising and assumes we can only absorb the knowledge of the dominating classes. Banking education according to Freire does not foster an understanding of knowledge and a curiosity for it.

"The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students' creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed" (Freire, 1970, p.54).

Freire proposes emancipatory pedagogy where people through critical reflection understand their world and produce their own knowledge.

Freire sees the act of knowing in two phases, the first one is the production of knowledge and the second one is the perception of the produced knowledge. This means that learners produce their own knowledge and own it. Knowledge in this case is not the property of schools or teachers. Who owns knowledge is no longer a question in this scenario, knowledge is co-written.

The act of knowing is to illuminate reality and to learn for social transformation (Freire and Shor, 1987).

Gramsci (1971) has an interesting view on banking education and believes that it is better to pass on some information than no information. I like the reasons why he wants to keep the teaching of Latin and Greek for example. It gives a learning rigor and an understanding of the world that can also benefit working class students in their future life. These are qualities that are needed to question the world. So not everything in the old school is bad it can be reused!

In my experience of learning English, I did learn vocabulary and grammar rules by heart! This is not a knowledge I have questioned it was a mean to an end.

To recognize "the partiality and situated nature of knowledges can provide for the possibility of enhancing understanding by challenging what are dominant ways of thinking" (May, 2016)

In other words, understanding the voice and the knowledge of the dominating classes, is acknowledging other knowledges. That in itself is a good way to become aware of oppressions, inequalities and injustices.

I find it hard to reconcile completely with the banking education model. I agree with Gramsci that some elements of knowledge are necessary and not everything from the dominating classes should be rejected systematically.

*We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge.*

*John Naisbitt<sup>14</sup>*

## **2 - The nature of knowledge**

If as Ledwith claims, "critical consciousness is the bedrock to social change" (2001), we need to understand what knowledge is and who is responsible for passing on that knowledge.

To understand what needs to be transformed or social change, we need to understand what's there and where.

Freire's approach is to start where people are and move to critical awareness or conscientisation. However, the alienation from human potential, from developing knowledge and producing knowledge, prevents us from being fully human. Being fully human is at the core of Freire's thought.

I think that to understand where people are, we need to ask ourselves what it is to be fully human. Gramsci's quote is very powerful:

"what is man?" what we mean is: what can man become? That is, can man dominate his own destiny, can he "make himself", can he create his own life? We maintain therefore that man is a process, and, more exactly, the process of his actions. If you think about it, the question itself "what is man?" is not an abstract or "objective" question. It is born of our reflections about ourselves and about others, and we want to know, in relation to what we have thought and see, what we are and what we can become; whether we really are, and if

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so to what extent, "makers of our own selves", of our own life and of our destiny. And we want to know this "today", in the given conditions of today, the conditions of our daily life, not of any life or any man". (Gramsci, 1971, p. 351)

If we own our knowledge, it would be interesting to find out what is worth of knowing?

Gramsci (1971) believes that everybody should use their "philosophy", their understanding of life to generate knowledge and go as far as turning "common sense" into critical thinking.

For Gramsci (1971), common sense is just accepting the way things are, accepting them as natural. It is an accepted vision of the world that has not gone through a process of critical thinking or what Freire calls "conscientisation". Like Freire, Gramsci believes in agency: it is possible to reach into people's truth, people consciousness and making meaning of these truths.

Even if Gramsci's vision of school is similar enough to banking, he still sees a method of using instruction, dialogue and reflection. He believes that students are able to turn the knowledge to their own advantage or their own ends. He explains education as an informed dialogue. Every pupil is a teacher and every teacher a pupil. This goes along with Freire's (1970) views producing knowledge dialectically with the tutor.

We have talked previously about education being a political space, it is obvious now that the knowledge production in itself has a political context.

Gramsci has taken from Marx that predominant ideas come from the ruling class (the ideas that are used education for example), he also establishes that the relationships of the ruling and lower classes with the means of production are maintained because the lower classes lack of critical reflection (Allman, 1999).

When Gramsci speaks about hegemony, he means the absorption of ideas and knowledge through imposition and absorption.

I find Young's (2014) reading relevant when trying to figure out ways of thinking about counter-hegemony.

She argues that groups are part of the social process and people identify themselves as part of a group (does not have to be necessarily oppressed or oppressor). However, oppression happens to people when they are in groups. To eliminate oppression do we need to eliminate groups? How can learning occur then if groups do not exist? How can change occur?

Or do we need to look at the definition of the group? Groups may be identified by others because they are excluded and are not necessarily aware that they exist as a group. When they become aware of that exclusion, they create the group identity (Young 2014).

For Freire's "conscientisation" or Gramsci "common sense" shift to happen, we need to acknowledge the multiple areas or groups where hegemonic knowledge is generated and maybe reconsider the group identity, not to be a centre of oppressions.

*I don't want anyone to give me nothing, just open the door and I'll do it myself.*

*James Brown*<sup>15</sup>

We have been discussing learning, education and knowledge and each time there are assumptions that we are critical thinkers, naturally. That we can generate our knowledge or at least are in a position to acknowledge our lack of criticality, which in itself requires critical thinking!

As Allman (1999), describes it, a more complete way to envisage change is to accept that "...it is only within the experience of struggling to transform relations and the experience of the transformation that our critical consciousness can fully develop" (p. 96).

## **How does it work?**

### **1 - Are we naturally critical thinkers?**

I just want to go back for a minute on my own experience of critical thinking and refresh my memory on what it means.

"Being critical requires a radical ethics, an ethics that is always/already concerned about power and oppression even as it avoids constructing "power" as a new truth" (Denzin, Lincoln, 2011, p. 81).

This definition makes sense to me now.

I need to admit that it is only in the past three years that I am looking at the world differently, with a critical eye.

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<sup>15</sup> James Brown (1933 - 2006) was an American singer, songwriter, and dancer. He was nicknamed the "Godfather of soul" and was hugely influential in the world of pop and soul music.

Rogers (1969) claims that “the capacity to face the new (world) is more important than the ability to know and repeat the old one” (p. 304).

Up until then I suppose I was in a state of contemplation of the world, feeling powerless. My vignettes are probably a reflection that the educational environment I value is the one that has opened me for change. But it has only happened progressively and over time.

When trying to find out if we can become critical thinkers, I can see a positive consistency between Gramsci, Dewey and Freire and their fundamental belief that we own knowledge and are capable to reflect upon it.

Gramsci (1971) has identified an intellectual someone who can influence worldviews and opinions of their own group. Because they live the experience of the group and as a result any change will benefit from the change).

According to Freire (1970), we cannot assume people ignorance. It is a myth from the oppressors that the oppressed need to be educated (however the perceptions of the oppressed need to be problematised with the assistance of the tutor).

Dewey (1938) sees everyone as philosophers so there is no need to introduce new thoughts into people's lives just a matter of making critical what is already there.

Mezirow sees “critical reflection as a rational, analytical, cognitive and social process” (Fleming 2000, p.5).

Let’s agree with the assumption that we can think critically. How do we go from self-reflection to implementation? Action?

I have decided to dedicate some time and thinking space to discuss the tutor/educator.

I think we can agree that everything discussed so far, learning, education, knowledge could not have taken place without a tutor/educator and none of my stories would lead me to where I am without one.

## **2 – Who is the critical educator?**

According to Allman (1999), the role of the educator has to be understood in the Freirean way, where there is a reciprocity between the teacher and the learner. The teacher becomes learner. the teacher facilitates a learning space, provides tools for learning to take place but the actual knowledge that is generated comes from both teacher and learner.

In other words, it is important to understand the relationship that each, learner and educator have to knowledge and break this barrier of the first one being the needy one and the second one being the owner and the producer of knowledge.

According to Freire (1970), both teacher and learner engage in the process of learning, however learners have to be in a receptive mind to accept the challenge of rethinking their position.

Teachers are researchers and knowledge workers, they need to encourage dialogue between knowledges. Theirs and the students' so tutors do not think for the students but with the student. Knowledge is created is through dialogue. Dialogue and not discussion!

"The students, no longer docile listeners, are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire, 1970, p.62).

In dialogue, there is a review and questioning of knowledge itself.

"Rather than focusing only on what we think, dialogue requires us to ask ourselves and each other why we think what we do" (Allman, 1999, p.100).

Dewey (1938) has also defined a role for the educator which he acknowledges as being difficult as the educator has to recognise the "moving force" (p. 38), the experience that will be growth and learning conducive and provide learning materials pulled from learners' lives and experiences.

For Mezirow (1997), the role of the educator is:

limited to fostering critical awareness and insight into the history and consequences of accepted social norms, cultural codes, ideologies, and institutionalized practices that oppress learners; to helping learners discover options for action and to anticipate the consequences of these options by becoming familiar with previous efforts to bring about change; to building solidarity with others similarly oppressed; and to helping learners develop the confidence and the ability to work with others to take collective action, to interpret feedback on their efforts, to deal with adversity, and to learn direct-action tactics for dealing with the system.

(p. 210)

Mezirow focuses on the learning process itself.

Dewey, Freire and Mezirow have defined a role for the tutor, which probably shows the concern and emphasis of locating the tutor's role in a social process and make the tutor an element of power.

However, for Freire, the role of the educator is critical to emancipatory education. This creates a relationship based on dependence or strong reliance tutor/learner. A reliance on the process of learning and also on its content. For Dewey, creating materials for teaching also establishes a level of dependency tutor/learner.

I have been struggling to reconcile with this part as it gives the tutor an authoritative voice that I am not comfortable with (as an educator and as a researcher).

I have noticed that theorists such as Dewey or Freire have defined a role for the tutor and other talk about qualities. I am now interested in investigating the qualities of the tutor that have been exposed by Carl Rogers (1969) and Nel Noddings (2012).

### **3 – What is the person-centred approach?**

Rogers (1969) has defined the person-centered approach as a learning relationship that can give learners more choice and freedom to think, to feel and to express themselves. Another way of feeling fully human I suppose.

Rogers (1969) key points of the person-centered approach are empathy, congruence and acceptance. Empathy is the sensitive understanding of the feeling and meaning of someone's experiences. This is key to create a relationship of meaningful understanding where learners can open up and grow. I have mentioned congruence when I spoke about my methodology, I think this is reasonable and expected that a tutor or a researcher seeks for congruence and honesty. This will make the relationship trustworthy, safe, equal and non-directive.

Finally, Rogers (1969) defines caring and acceptance as the facilitator's "essential confidence and trust in the capacity of the human organism" (p.109).

This is believing that learners are fundamentally trustworthy. Genuine caring that tells learners they are accepted for who they are.

I find these elements complete well the role of the critical educator defined above with their strong humanistic approach of trust, respect and humanity and contribute to what O'Neill (2005) defines as "a kind of pedagogic space that trusted people to interrogate their own biographies critically in a trusting space" (p. 8).

#### **4 – What about the caring relationship?**

Along with Rogers person-centered approach, Nel Noddings' definition and emphasis of the caring relationship between student and tutor stroke me as being at the heart of progressive education. Nel Noddings is an American feminist, educationalist, and philosopher best known for her work in philosophy of education, educational theory, and ethics of care. She has developed a philosophy based on ethics of care that prioritizes concern for relationships.

She talks about care, about trust and defines the caring relationship where the "relation is ontologically basic, and the caring relation is ethically (morally) basic" (2012, p.771). This really struck me as a usable, practical methodology as a tutor, but also as a philosophy when reflecting on learning.

Noddings (2005) defines care ethics as a three steps pedagogy, "First, as we listen to our students, we gain their trust...Second, as we engage our students in dialogue we learn about their needs...Finally, (as) we acquire knowledge about our students' needs..."

This meets Dewey's experiential learning where education meets learners where they are and where the educative experience is the one connected to prior experience.

A lot of our prior discussions have been based on learner's needs within a social context. Noddings (2005) has defined the expressed needs as being the needs conducive to growth and learning. These needs come from the learner and rely on the tutor's ability to promote emotional support, moral direction and shared human interest in the classroom.

What I like about Rogers and Noddings thoughts is that they focus on the nature of the relationship tutor/learner and not so much on the expected results from that relationship.

Regardless of the assumptions we have discussed so far about learning, education and knowledge, I would like to discuss if there are risks attached to looking at alternative education or new ways of learning.

#### **What are the risks?**

Learning for change or learning to change are a challenge to the mind and a threat to the identity.

According to Mezirow (2015), learning needs emotional disturbance and disorienting dilemma.

We cannot neglect the emotional complexity of the learning process and "the vulnerability that lies at the heart of change" (McCormack 2009, p.18).

Dewey (1938) has identified "a central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experience that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (p. 28). Dewey explains that in the traditional education system students do have experiences but they are the wrong kind, the kind that limit power of judgement and creativity, the ones that reinforce boredom and lack of interest for subject matter, the one that do not prepare for life outside of school.

He adds, "any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience" (p. 25).

If an experience has a learning capacity that can be positive or negative, what happens when a learner has too many negative experiences?

I mentioned before that I was focusing on my positive experiences to look at what learning means to me. Indeed, if I had decided to focus on negative experiences, this research would have taken another approach.

Learning is change but not all change is transformational (Mezirow, 1997).

Making critical thinking a disposition for learning is risky for tutors too as it goes against traditional education of knowledge transference of banking education (Freire and Shor, 1987), some learners will resist and Shor talks about a "transition pedagogy" (p. 11). She emphasizes that the role of the educator in that case is to research the learners and really understand where they are coming from. There again this puts a role on the educator that only a "critical educator" would accept and understand. The challenging learning habits are present for the learner as well as the educator. Critical thinking as an approach to rely on for learning is risky too, as it may be counterproductive and lead to apathy or non-action. What happens when critical thinking only seems to be affecting few members of a group?

Learning in a political context? Learning is a political context?

I have struggled to engage fully in the political discourse probably as this is a new experience for me. As I explained in the earlier part, I have come across this new knowledge during the HDip course and now the Masters and it is taking me a while to make meaning of that.

I am now curious to see what the interview findings are going to reveal.

## THE COOL PART

I decided to call this section “The cool part” because it brings some of the elements I have just discussed to life, but not all elements...

I am no longer contemplating an abstract world but witnessing some of the theories in action. Maybe I should say that the research findings and my vignettes are definitely contributing to enliven the theories.

I have read the transcripts many times and each time I see a new meaning, a new perspective. I am starting to wonder if this is meant to be, how close, how far am I now from what the participants meant? I thought I was shaping my research and am wondering if it is now shaping me? My findings analysis is going to be inherently subjective as mainly drawn by the emotions (a mix of uplift, upset, anger, fun, confusion, hope, the list could go on). Talking to the participants got me emotionally. When Davies & Powell (2012) claim that "While we often, as researchers, strive to communicate the nature of ‘lived experience’, we very rarely aim to recreate that experience so that those we seek to influence can live it for themselves" (p. 226).

This research must stick in people's mind. How? How to communicate the lived experience of participants in such a way that the reader can close their eyes and live that experience themselves, through emotions and possibly move towards a shift of perceptions? In fact, it is more than communicating, it is about engaging in dialogue.

“If it is in speaking their world that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity” (Freire, 1970, p. 69).

It is not easy to do this through words only. Human suffering, oppressions and also possibilities deserve the right kind of communication, words that reflect humility, faith in humankind and love (Freire, 1970).

What if I misunderstood, what if I don’t give their story a loud enough voice to make it meaningful and emotional?

The predominant research question addresses what learning means to me and has just been subjected to reflections.

I want to find out now if what I have experienced also resonates in a different context. The one of adult education as experienced by the research participants.

This part presents the findings from the interviews I have had with three participants. It is a space for their voices and my interpretations. I mentioned earlier that I had selected the participants who, I believe, embody a progressive vision of learning and education through their practice.

The first participant is a male participant. He is a popular educator and has carried exhaustive research on popular education in Southern America.

The second participant is a female participant who works as a community development worker and implements educational projects within local communities to promote inclusion and integration.

The third participant is a female participant who has set up a school twenty years ago to help learners who have left school early or dropped off school to complete their education and prepare for the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate.

I have chosen to interview these participants because they have a vision of learning and education which does not fit into the formal or traditional model of education.

They all come from a different perspective and context, the first participant is a university lecturer and a critical pedagogue, the second one promotes courses amongst community groups who may not have direct access to education and the third participant is the head of an alternative school for marginalised and excluded groups.

They all have a passion, interest and years of experience for learning.

I have carried two phone interviews with the first and third participant and a face to face interview with the second participant. It was all in the form of a conversation than a semi-structured interview as I followed the line of thought of participants.

To facilitate reading this part, we will call the first participant P1, the second participant P2 and the third participant P3.

I am going to expose now what I have found out through the interviews.

### **Education is social and political**

Education is not a neutral terrain. It has a political and social purpose in its philosophy and practice.

“Also, the philosophy, all education is political and if you don’t try to change the world you are actually keeping it the way it is.” (P1)

This is P1's definition of popular education but these elements are also reflected by the other participants.

When talking about the educational programmes offered P2 explains that they look at "issues that impact on communities", "with workshops on racism, funding application or on disabilities, so projects around "integration of minority groups, new communities, mainstream groups, geographical focus groups and communities of interest".

The social and inclusion element is indeed emphasized by P3 as she explains to me the profile of students who attend her school as "children who were out of school for their exams". Some of them may have been expelled, others left school or gave up on school, Some also have mental health issues "there is hardly a child in my class who isn't suffering from some sort of anxiety, who isn't on tablets, who isn't going to a therapist , who isn't trying to commit suicide." (P3)

According to P1, any educational environment that has a social aspect/reflects a social movement is popular education. "there are overlaps and different people may be doing the same thing and calling it different things." he gives examples of "development education, anti-racism education, multicultural education, human rights education".

Learning has a purpose which is to understand and react on social reality and it is a combination of a philosophy and practice of education. There is a specific ethos that education is social and political and focuses on the integration of marginalised and minority groups and also in the awareness of the diversity of a community and the identification of group diversity.

P2 explains:

You need to know your communities as much as you can...but you know they are not just one community there is such diversity. We talk about for example the travelling community, but you know there is such diversity within that and the same with new communities and people with disabilities or whatever...

According to P1, popular education is in every space where there is a learning philosophy that promotes social justice by challenging inequalities. There are examples of progressive education in the UK and Europe, challenge knowledge in terms of race, culture, gender or age for example

within formal and informal settings. The popular education philosophy is not exclusive to Latin America.

In the context of community development and educational programmes, the learning space created is a space where communities can come together. There is a strong element of social action and responsibility by providing a space that gives a voice to all community groups. Participants are facilitated to use their own voice. This means allowing minority, oppressed and marginalised groups to express their condition.

“I think an awful lot of what we do is to look at how we can find opportunities for different groups to come together as a kind of overarching commitment to promote equality and social inclusion” (P2).

Sometimes the strength of the group leads to action, P2 gave me an example of a group of asylum seekers getting together to improve their living conditions in a centre. P2 summarises this situation by stating that “there is something about the collective coming together but it’s also about protecting the individual within that but the collective voice is much stronger obviously”.

This collective action is also reiterated by P1 when he says that “if you want social change you do need to aspire to people working collectively, but that doesn’t mean to say you don’t work individually as well”.

Both participants introduce the subtlety that the collective is stronger for social action, however, the individual cannot be neglected and has to be in a state of awareness and readiness to make this change happen.

These are clear examples showing the non-neutrality of progressive education. They make it easier for me to understand what political means, in the context of education.

### **A voice for the individual and the collective**

In the context of P2, course participants are encouraged to share their own experiences in such a way that they build their capacity individually and also as part of the group. There is a strong sense of seeing the collective as a powerful force and yet being able to provide individual development and agency. The course content is driven by the learners' needs and is aiming to develop capacity building for the community and leadership skills for people involved in their own community.

P2 statement highlights this point by saying, “I think you are also building individual capacity and I think part of that is about people realising they have a voice and they can use that voice and that their views and ideas are perfectly acceptable and probably excellent”.

She also sees the power of the collective coming together to protected individual. This is particularly the case for marginalised groups.

P1 confirms this point when he claims that:

you learn as a community, you learn in groups but you also ultimately learn as an individual so there’s absolutely no contradiction between the two, there are different, ultimately if you want social change you do need to aspire to people working collectively.

I was always tempted to dichotomize the individual and the collective, there again this illustrates how both individual learning and collective learning go together.

### **An engagement with learners**

Education is an engagement, not manipulation, not propaganda - an open plan for dialogue that questions knowledge. When explaining his teaching method P1 explained that he takes the ideas, the practice, the case studies and the social and political context and “get people to reflect on in what way they thought it was relevant to their own context.”

Additionally, P1 makes his own political opinion clear, however, he sees the learning space as “honest and engaging with ideas and arguing a point of view, but there is no right answer your students must come up with”.

P2 recognizes the critical need to engage with participants and is “very committed and open to meet each individual person within communities”. She also adds that they “carry out local needs analysis” to understand where the learning needs and also to understand where learners come from. She explains that “the only people who are experts in their lives are the people who are living their lives.”

P3 sees her engagement with learners as more than education when she describes the “excitement” and “sense of achievement” students get when they succeed at their exams results. It is a contribution to their personal life and development.

“We didn’t know that at the time but the outcomes from when they left school into society have been magical”. A real sense of pride for both learners and teachers.

## **An engagement with the state**

For mass liberatory education to take place, it needs to engage with the state.

According to P1, “the more radical education takes place outside of the state, however, for a mass education system, you need the state, so many would argue that no matter how radical you are you need to engage with the state”.

This is where this radical philosophy of education meets the system and the institution...

This engagement/dialogue can be confrontational or agreeable. P1 gave me an example where his philosophy somehow “clashed” with the University practice.

So according to P1, the educator’s role is to “find a way to work as consistently as you possibly can” and “you have been upfront, and you know you are engaging in education for social change”.

P1 has identified a challenge with the involvement with the state when he states that “popular education completely outside of the state is exciting but it’s not a mass education system so you have to engage with a mass education system and you have to find a way of doing that and I think that’s the challenge”.

Working within the system does not always work, P3 has explained how when she used to teach in a secondary school and introduced a new way to engage and motivate students with a reward system, colleagues made her effort counterproductive, she says “ I knew then that I could deal with the children but I could not deal with the adult. I stopped this, I stopped this scheme altogether”.

However, P3 has started a new school, she calls it as such and claims that there are “classes, timetables and prepare for exams...it’s very much the teacher and the class”.

The main reason behind this is that she sees the exams as “a rite of passage and it is great movement into adulthood”, she sees exams as a “great instrument to education”.

Even though the objectives of P3’s school is to help students succeed at their state exams, she receives little funding and no recognition for the work accomplished. She calls herself a school but is still considered as a project and has to apply for funding regularly. She uses volunteers and more experienced students as teachers.

This is an interesting example of using a state or institution teaching/learning model in a context that does not use typical pedagogies.

For P2, the courses have a social purpose which is to encourage social connections and creating networks amongst groups that may not have been initially seen as sharing anything or having anything in common ( such values, lives, beliefs, oppression...).

I think one of the things that I have been very proud of in coordinating these programs is the connections that have been made between people who generally wouldn't have come together maybe wouldn't have had an opportunity to spend the hours sitting under one roof (P2).

She recognizes the impact on communities as a mean of reinforcing and strengthening their identities.

## **Learning**

"Good enough is good enough", "we celebrate what's right", these quotes from P3 really stroke me because this is not what we would expect from a formal learning environment. Here in the context of a school that helps students who have dropped off or have been kindly "invited" to leave school early, this is a breakthrough and it seems to work.

P3 philosophy of education is straightforward when she says "children learn better if they are happier...the first thing you should do is make sure they are happy". She also believes that "children when they are born learn a massive amount, with no homework and no coercion and just enjoy it". She has created such a learning environment that start where learners are, and "celebrate what's right". Based on the assumption that learners want to excel and "when we excel, we want to do better", she describes her pedagogy as "succeed through success".

P2 gives us another way of looking at learning needs when she says that "The only people who are experts in their lives are the people who are living it". She is also aware and concerned about meeting learners' needs: "there is a huge thing about raising expectations and not being able to meet those needs". Everything is put in place to counteract learners' possible barriers to learning.

P2 mainly identifies them as logistical barriers (such as transport, financial and childcare), P3 sees these barriers as a system that does not understand how students learn "the main reason that I know of children leaving school is because they don't like school. So why want children to stay in school?"

For P1, learning can only happen in a context where learners are engaged politically "without being engaged in propaganda". He adds that "it is not about forcing ideas into someone; it's about being

honest and engaging with ideas and arguing a point of view but there is no right answer which your students must come up with.”

P1 has raised a challenge by emphasizing that popular education is a political philosophy and a practice as sometimes it can be reduced to an educational method or technique used in training for example:

the key thing about popular education, as well as the philosophy, it's become very famous for its methods, it's got very good exciting participatory methods but very often that is confused, you know if you take the ideas of Augusto Boal or if you do this exercise or that exercise you do popular education, it's very important to recognize that the methods are only tools (P1).

### **Not so cool after all**

What we call political...

When I started this research, all the signs were showing that I was a critical researcher but very reluctantly, I was trying to make meaning of what political means in the educational context.

What is becoming clear now is that everybody has a perspective and I understand that this perspective is influenced and driven by systems of oppression and discrimination or rather by values of equality, justice and social inclusion. In fact, these humanistic values are the drive and make education more social than political.

It focuses mainly on social inclusion but not so much on creating spaces for critical and dialectical discussions about power structures.

Progressive education does not position itself in a black or white situation. It is not a matter of making a choice between formal schooling models and informal models, banking education or experiential learning. It is not about replacing a knowledge by another one. It is about giving ownership and responsibility to people to produce their own knowledge.

Knowledge may not be about rejecting dominant ideas or values or aspects of the current educational system like exams and certifications. It's about understanding what's there and be able to critically adopt it or reject it, a vision exposed by Gramsci.

The ironies...

The learning that brought me to engage in a critical reflection about learning has been grounded on ideas of experiential learning (Dewey, 19838) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) with an emphasis on how my teachers and learning space made me feel. Valued, praised, encouraged, all of these ideas found in the person-centred approach of Carl Rogers and caring relationships of Nell Noddings. I truly believe that the learning I have depicted was based on my needs or met my needs in the present.

The findings here are also reflecting the necessity of (1) a learning pedagogy, a combination of methods and tools, (2) a necessity to start where learners are, learners being the expert of their own lives. However, there are also an element that "learners do not always have a means to express needs. Individual needs may not coincide with group or community needs" (Tennant as cited in Connolly et al. 2012, p.154). This is particularly relevant to P1's perspectives of critical pedagogy.

I am starting to wonder, when, if looking at education for social change, investigating knowledge or making knowledge the pivotal element is the way to go.

I feel strongly that a part of critical or alternative education is by principle and definition too focused on knowledge, based on the principle that the knowledge we get is from a dominating class. Findings reveal that P2, P3 and my own experiences made us reflect on what's there first. Consider learners where they are. To know what to critique requires understanding what's there first and I feel sometimes we tend to skip that step.

Findings show that some knowledge, even produced by a dominating group, the example in the findings is P3 school, I also have discussed Gramsci view on banking education, may not need to be questioned.

There has been a lot of assumptions in my "talk" about living in a learning society (Mezirow, 1997), about being intrinsically knowledgeable and able to use our own knowledge for transformation (Freire, Gramsci), about individuals wanting to take part in social inquiry (as part of their individual learning process), about the current learning models using curricula designed by the ruling classes. These assumptions are not obvious in the findings. What is obvious is the reality of juggling between learning conditions that are learner driven, to make learners fit into society.

P3's acceptance of the national examinations is a crying example of that. Similarly, when P2 talks about social inclusion and integration, she facilitates courses that fit into the society's expectations to have minority groups "educated". Worse, according to (Crowther, 2000), it could also be

interpreted as a privilege, “as a favour bestowed by those in authority” (p. 483) or expose “a “learning divide” between those who have more and receive more, and those who have had little and receive less” (p. 481).

The purpose of that education itself has not been clearly stated as a tool to promote societal change, in fact, it is important to understand if the purpose of education is for social conscience or social consciousness, in other words, is it linked to community activities or individual involvement? (Crowther, 2000).

I have mentioned many times in this work that I was not so comfortable with the critical researcher and critical educator assumptions based on oppressions using a Marxist framework. The research does widen our horizons in terms of oppressions by shining a light on minority groups, such as early school leavers or disability groups or travellers.

The oppressions defined by the findings are the ones lead by Young (2014) based on powerlessness, marginalisation and cultural imperialism and there is an effort to create integration and networks between these groups.

From the findings, it is not clear whether the learning envisaged is one for individual empowerment or social action. If I look at P3 experiences, it is more situated in the areas of learning for freedom and self-empowerment, similar observation for P2 who looks at learner's individual development and achievement but also situates it in the context of motivating individuals within groups or families who may not consider third level education otherwise.

I find that the findings point to creating spaces for knowledge but not so much on how learning happens and not so much on how critical thinking happens.

One thing seems clear, only the collective can make change happen in society, however transformation through learning seems to be an individual process. The barriers to learning I have exposed earlier on are unique to each individual or can be extended to some groups (one parent families or immigrants for example).

The individual and the collective, in the collective?

When Finnegan (2014) asks “how collective forms of activity and learning are dialectically related to individuals’ inner worlds and how this informs specific experiences of learning and education”, the findings may lead to think that the individual reaches out to the collective rather than the

opposite. It is only through emancipation or conscience-raising activities that the individual will be able to appraise truly its social circumstances.

Some forms of learning may be emancipatory for the self, but not necessarily have an impact of social change. I suppose this is where the voice of the collective matters and makes a difference. This form of reflexive learning “begins with individual subjects questioning the accepted practice” (Engeström cited in Finnegan 2014) and the tools concepts and practices are there which allow it to “gradually expands into a collective movement or institution” (Engeström cited in Finnegan 2014) .

This research has been based on various educational contexts, the participants’ and mine. I think it is critical to understand this variety that leads to tailored actions but not necessarily a common philosophy or model of education.

It is also interesting to note that this variety of learning contexts exposes a need to review the curriculum to include people's life experiences, cultures and connections, also a curriculum that use the knowledge of the groups.

What surprises me from the findings is the omnipresence of the institution, either form, methods or models of learning.

Even though I was hoping to give a new life to learning with this work, it looks like “real learning” is constructed in terms of a controlled space (e.g. buildings), time (e.g. timetables) and learning opportunities (e.g. curriculum) which are regulated by educational institutions” (Crowther, 2000 p. 484) and that seems to be the dominant discourse.

Crowther has, however, exposed what he calls “a learning iceberg” (p. 490), the learning that takes place outside of institutions and that we have discussed previously as informal learning spaces.

Regardless of the end goal of learning, it is important I believe, to appreciate and try to understand learning for what it is. And then consider what it should do.

## CONCLUSION

The journey is now coming to an end. This research on learning itself, has been a process of learning and unlearning.

I had asked previously if this work was worthy of a sociological subject (Denzin, 2014).

I am asking now, have I challenged your taken for granted assumptions on what learning meant?

Have I exposed the cracks of the dominating discourse? Have I given a voice to a minority and made a personal issue a social issue? Have I engaged dialectically with myself and the research participants to generate social criticism? Have I helped you imagine how things could be different? Have I confused you? If the answer is yes to most questions, can we agree that we have reached a space for critical inquiry where the topic of learning requires time and attention.

Let's not remain disengaged with learning, let the quest to explore new learning models continue.

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## **Appendix 1: The consent form with participants**

### **Consent form:**

I am extremely grateful for your time and contribution to this research.

### **A bit about myself...**

My name is Myriam Doyle. I am a student at Maynooth University and currently doing a Masters in Community and Adult Education.

The objective of the Masters is the completion of a research thesis.

I completed the HDip in Further Education two years ago which was a life-changing experience for me and an eye-opener to the world of education and learning.

I have four children, two in primary school, one in secondary school and one in University and I am questioning the teaching and learning environment they are in. I have also been self-employed for the past sixteen years and have a small business selling educational and developmental toys.

### **About the research...**

I have a strong interest in researching learning environments that promote emancipation and freedom.

I have always had a deep interest in finding out how we learn, based upon my own experience of learning outside of the school system.

I want to explore transformative adult education as an approach that supports learning.

I would love to talk to you in the form of a face-to-face or phone interview to explore your views on ways of learning.

### **Your involvement as a participant in the research:**

My participation in the research is entirely voluntary.

I am aware that the conversations between Myriam and I will be recorded for the purpose of this research.

The interview will take place face to face or by phone.

Note taking and audio-recording will be used during the research process.

Any record or recordings of my contribution to the research will be stored securely, in line with Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy.

The transcripts from my conversation with Myriam will be emailed back to me for approval and I have the right to amend and/or remove some of the content.

I understand that the notes, transcripts and recordings will only be accessed by Myriam Doyle and myself.

I understand that the thesis will then be made available publicly by Myriam Doyle the researcher and the Department of Community and Adult Education of Maynooth University, via their website - <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/adult-and-community-education/publications>

I have the option for my name and the name of the organisation I work for to be used in the research thesis or to be kept anonymous.

I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

The purpose of this research has been explained to me fully.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby agree for my name and the name of my organisation to be mentioned in Myriam Doyle's research thesis.

OR

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby disagree for my name and the name of my organisation to be mentioned in Myriam Doyle's research thesis.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby consent to partake in this study, under the conditions outlined above.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact details:

**Researcher:**

Myriam Doyle

Contact email: [Myriam.doyle@mu.ie](mailto:Myriam.doyle@mu.ie)

Tel: 083 4045575

**Supervisor:**

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Co. Kildare

Contact email: [Camilla.Fitzsimons@mu.ie](mailto:Camilla.Fitzsimons@mu.ie)

Tel: 01 708 3951

If, during your participation in this study you have any issues or concerns, please feel free to contact my supervisor Camilla Fitzsimons.

## **Appendix 2: The consent form with my children**

### **Consent Form**

Thank you for your time and contribution in my research.

#### **About the research...**

I am a student at Maynooth University and currently doing a Masters in Community and Adult Education.

The objective of the Masters is the completion of a research thesis.

I have a strong interest in learning and I would like your permission to use some of your stories about your school life in my research thesis.

I, (name of participant), authorise Myriam Doyle to use some of the stories and experiences I have shared with her about my school life.

I have been made aware of the content that will be used in this research and I am free to ask for amendments or changes in the content used.

I understand that the thesis will then be made available publicly by Myriam Doyle the researcher and the Department of Community and Adult Education of Maynooth University, via their website - <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/adult-and-community-education/publications>

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Tel: 01 708 3951

If, during your participation in this study you have any issues or concerns, please feel free to contact my supervisor Camilla Fitzsimons.

X

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Subject signature

X

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Date