

**Access and Accessibility:  
Where Student and Academy Meet<sup>1</sup>**

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The title of the conference ‘Building Islands or Bridge’ suggests some kind of boundary, barrier or obstacle. In this paper<sup>2</sup> I would like to explore the nature of the boundary between adult education and higher education; between adults and the university; between the community and the academy.

The issue of access for mature students has come to prominence in Irish higher education. Several reports have highlighted and explored the policy and practical aspects of access to higher education (Martin and O’Neill, 1996; Morris, 1997; Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999). The government report on the future of higher education (Steering Committee on the Future of Higher Education, 1995) proposed that mature students as a proportion of full-time entrants should increase to 25 per cent of total entrants by the year 2015. Both the Government’s Green and White Papers on education (Department of Education, 1992; 1995) emphasised the importance of achieving greater equality in education and viewed lifelong learning within higher education as a stimulus to achieving this equality. The Universities Act, 1997 defined one objective of the university as “to facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education.” More recently the Irish government produced a Green Paper on adult education (Department of Education and Science, 1998), which consolidates some of the issues put forward by previous reports and government documents. Finally, the White Paper on Adult Education (Department of Education and Science, 2000, pp. 138-147)

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outlined key directions for participation of adults; reaffirmed existing targets and outlined policy on access and delivery; accreditation; and student support.

The key issue is access – opening the system of higher education so that more adults can avail of what essentially is an elitist system of education for the children of the middle classes. Access to higher education is seen as a significant factor in reducing inequality and disadvantage. Clancy (1995, p. 115) echoes many of the recommendations of other reports when he states that second-chance education,

Must not be seen as a luxury which we can attend to when the demographic pressure has passed at the end of this decade. Social justice and economic considerations dictate that it be seen as a current priority.

This interest in issues relating to access is a welcome addition to the Irish debate on education and inequality. But this debate does not go far enough. If social and justice considerations are taken seriously, then the higher education institutions themselves need to be examined more closely, particularly when it comes to the production of knowledge.

What is access about? There are important debates concerning issues of access and provision – the development of outreach programmes, links to partnership organisations and community education projects. Entry routes to university present a very real and very obvious boundary between the two sectors.

Debates about higher education and adults have tended to focus on issues of access, to the detriment of accessibility. The difference between these two approaches:

The first approach tends to dwell on *mechanisms* of access - on ways for making possible the entry into higher education of so-called 'non-traditional' students.... The second type of approach...aims, above all else, at increasing the general accessibility of the higher education system as a whole: at identifying, and overcoming the multifarious factors which make it remote, or unattractive, to the majority of the English population. (Wright, 1989, p. 99)

This discussion, when examined more closely, really focuses on the kind of boundaries that exist between adult and higher education institutions. It's an issue of access into higher education for not only adults, but also for adult education itself. This is the

approach put forward by those involved in the British access movement, which has moved on from focusing on mechanisms of access such as outreach programmes and accreditation of prior learning to examining how higher education is equipped to cope with adult learners who successfully enter the institutions (Fulton, 1989; Parry and Wake, 1990; Schuller, 1991; Duke, 1997).

Those involved in the access movement often see higher education as maintaining rather than reducing social inequality. Universities, it is argued, function to stifle and inhibit the participation of adults. The accessibility movement is founded on the principle of making the university more 'adult friendly' (NIACE, 1993).

There is a need "for a system that recognises the distinctive experiences adults bring to their learning... Provision for adult learners needs to take account of the experience adults bring to their learning, the complexity of their objectives, the discontinuity of their participation, and the financial complexity of their lives." (Tuckett, 1990, p. 127)

There is a subsequent call for the academy to adopt a 'learner-centred' approach – the traditional adult education philosophy.

If an adult higher education implies a learner, rather than subject, centred curriculum, tutoring and guidance must be central functions, rather than emergency services added at the margins to cope with problems. McNair (1998, p. 171)

Here, adult educators are making a connection between power and knowledge in the institution.

Adult education, in some quarters, has taken an oppositional stance to the academy, viewed as an institution that does not value the experiences of the adult learner. Where the academy validates objective knowledge, adult education, particularly in its liberal and community education format, celebrates the subjective and the experiential. The world of experience becomes the central issue and basis upon which learning takes place, rather than the world of facts.

Low self-esteem and the sense that one does not 'really belong here' can quickly be brought to the surface by the attitude of a tutor who regards prior experience as

of little value, or by someone who briskly or impatiently urges someone to speak up. Another may feel undermined by an encounter with a teacher who, like a woman's husband, quietly thinks that the emphasis women might place on the interpretation of connections within the whole, and on interrelationships, is slightly suspect on a science course. Her interventions, her attempts to make sense of the subject within her world view, may continually remain quietly and politely unrecognised and kept invisible until, without watering, attempts to speak wither and die. (Weil, 1989, pp. 137-138)

But we wanted to explore the kinds of boundaries that exist within the institutions themselves. What barriers to knowledge and the knowledge society are manifested in the experiences of adult learners? It is the type of real or imagined boundaries felt by adults that, in many ways, constitute the most difficult and intransigent barriers to creating an adult higher education of lifelong learners?

### **Mature Students in Irish Higher Education: Negotiation and Resistance**

Data compiled from two studies, one funded by the Department of Social Welfare and carried out in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth and the other funded by the Higher Education Authority and which took place in University College Dublin (Fleming & Murphy, 1997 and Inglis & Murphy, 1999).

Although these studies were carried out in different universities, a similar theme emerged regarding the mature student experience and accessibility in higher education. The general question asked in both of these studies was: what were the most significant factors involved in the success of students? We found that financial issues, relationships with partners and other external commitments, the kind of support they received at college, and the type of access route they took, all had a bearing on their success.

It became clear that, although these issues were important and presented difficulties for students, it was the learning process itself that presented students with the most difficult barrier to achieving a degree. What we found intriguing was how mature students attempted to meet both their own learning needs and the requirements or needs of the college.

What exists between the individual mature student, with their experiential knowledge, and the college, with its highly structured, abstract theoretical knowledge, is a latent conflict that manifests itself in various ways. In particular the conflict arises in the process of writing essays and examinations.

There are two interlinked issues at the heart of the research findings: that in themselves define the broader parameters of the access to higher education debate – the form of learning on offer in the university; and the type of knowledge being defined as valid and useful. It became rapidly clear that students own subjective knowledge, accumulated over a lifetime of working and raising families, is ignored by the university as having little to do with the demands of academia.

The disjuncture experienced by mature students between their perception of what was required and what the institution demands of them, in reality, was only a manifestation of a latent conflict between the mature learner and the institution. This conflict is worked out on two grounds:

- between two different forms of knowledge, what we call ‘common’ or subjective knowledge, and ‘college’ of objective academic knowledge;
- between two different approaches to learning, the experiential learning approach, of course the mainstay of adult education, and the academic approach to learning, the one based on the exploration of theory and ideas.

These two areas of disjuncture, constitute a fundamental conflict of interests between adult and higher education. It is on these interconnected battlegrounds that there are found the real barriers to access for adult learners.

It is interesting to point out that many of the adults we talked to had taken preparatory adult education courses. Many times adult learners find the learner-centred and experiential approaches of access courses at odds with that put forward in university. This issue is highlighted by Melling and Stanton.

If learning programmes on preparatory or access courses are increasingly tailor-made to suit the learning needs of individuals, then this is likely to increase the degree of curriculum discontinuity which can already exist between such courses

and those in higher education itself. There is some evidence that learners who have prospered on specially designed access courses find the transition to higher education difficult not because of any lack of ability but because of the inflexibility and unresponsiveness of teaching methods in much of higher education. (Melling and Stanton, 1990, p. 144)

West (1996) found that this results in a fragmentation of the student in the experience of returning to college. The self becomes fragmented into private (being a partner or parent) and public spheres (the student). The fragmentation involves a separating of experiential ways of knowing that are personal, subjective and emotional from academic ways of knowing that are objective and abstract (West, 1996, p. ix). Students in his study wondered why academic and personal knowledge could not be merged (West, p. 203). Quoting Weil (1993), West goes on to name the level of inadequacy and inferiority that is heightened in this experience where one's own experience, insights and stories are denigrated.

### **Beyond Common and College Knowledge**

In the following quote, Weil identifies how short-sighted and myopic present debates are regarding adult provision, and their reluctance to come to terms with some of the more fundamental issues that problematise the relationship between adult and higher education.

Adult learners do not bring their experience with them into education; they *are* their experience (Knowles, 1978). But the answers to the real complexities and challenges of this idea do not seem to lie simply in modular programmes, access courses, distance- or open-learning initiatives, experiential learning or andragogy. They lie in much finer nuances of expressing respect, concern and care for individuals, and in giving priority to the need for adults to build upon and make sense of their experiences within the context of their own and others' 'life worlds'. (Weil, 1989, p. 142)

This problem and conflict rests on two very different educational philosophies, which encompass two juxtaposed notions of educational process and content. One the adult education philosophy – with a student-centred, experientially based learning process, with an elevation of subjective knowledge as the generator of other knowledges; and the higher education philosophy, with its subject-centred process and focus on objective

factual data. The issue here is neither to valorize experiential learning nor to elevate objective knowledge.

But the real debate and the one that lies behind any real talk of accessibility, concerns the control and definition of knowledge. Knowledge, and the debate over what counts as useful and valid knowledge, constitutes the real boundary between adult and higher education.

The expansion of secondary and higher education throughout the twentieth century has not succeeded in building a well-educated citizenry capable of participating effectively in the political processes which shape their lives. There is a tightening link between knowledge, power and the impersonal structures of a global economy. In the information society new fracture lines of social inequality are built on differential access to the means of communication, learning and knowledge (Coffield and Williamson, 1997, p. 8).

It is as if a script has been written where two sectors of education ensured they would be diametrically opposed. One taking the subjective and experiential approach to knowledge and as a consequence learning, and the other the objective and factual based approach.

We are reminded by Belenky (1986, p. 124) that;

In the institutions of higher learning most of the women attended, the subjective voice was largely ignored; feelings and intuitions were banished to the realm of personal and private. It was the public, rational, analytical voice that received the institutions' tutelage, respect, and reward. Most of these women profited from the tutelage, respect, and rewards, and most were grateful to their colleges for nurturing their analytical powers. In acquiring the skills of separated knowing, women in this position did, indeed, transcend the stereotypes of women as creatures ruled by instinct and emotion, incapable of reason; but they also adopted a stereotyped view of reason as detached from feeling and removed from everyday experience.

From a more radical tradition in adult education Paulo Freire, in discussions with Myles Horton, (Bell, et al., 1990, p. 97) asserted that the people have the right to participate in the process of producing new knowledge. The people's knowledge he calls practical knowledge and the knowledge the teacher brings to the discussion he calls theoretical

knowledge. The task for the teacher is to better understand theoretically what is happening in the people's practice. This he (Bell, p. 101) describes as

going beyond the common sense of the people, with the people. My quest is not to go alone but to go with the people. Then having a certain scientific understanding of how the structures of society work, I can go beyond the common-sense understanding of how the society works - not to stay at this level but, starting from this, to go beyond. Theory does that.

Freire is not claiming that educators do not have knowledge, no more than he is claiming that students do not have knowledge. When students arrive they bring with them their hopes, despair, expectations, knowledge, which they got by living. Freire puts it this way:

They do not arrive empty. They arrive full of things....they bring with them their knowledge at the level of common sense, and they have the right to go beyond this level of knowledge....This is a right that the people have, and I call it the right to know better what they already know. Knowing better means precisely going beyond the *common sense* in order to discover the *reason* for the facts. (Bell, p. 157)

In his radical critique of academic knowledge Freire makes a distinction between critical revolutionary pedagogy and academic pedagogy. Education is about a deep or critical reading of commonness reality (Escobar, et al. 1994, p. xviii).

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