

# The State of Adult Education

TED FLEMING

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## Introduction

In the novel *The Plague* (Camus, 1960) the city of Oran is ravaged by a plague. Tarrou had just reflected on how each one of us “has the plague within” (p. 207). It is wearying to be plague-stricken, he says, and this is why “everybody in the world to-day looks so tired; everyone is more or less sick of plague” (p. 207).

All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it’s up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences. (Camus, 1960, p. 207)

I see pestilences, as I think Camus does, as a metaphor for what is happening in the world. It is difficult to make any comment about our world without referring to Iraq, the mistreatment of prisoners, the motivation of the United States in being there especially having found no weapons of mass destruction. There are pestilences nearer home too – persistent poverty, scandals and corruption.

What has this to do with adult education? It has to do with the role of adult education in a democratic society; with what we mean by adult learning and what we teach as adult educators. How to be an active and critical citizen has to be learned.

I want to look at the state of adult education in Ireland. I am suggesting that the state here means both the condition in which we now find adult education and the role of the Irish State in adult education. I will briefly outline

- some recent developments in adult education;

- make some critical comments on the state of adult education;
- look at the links between the State and the economy and civil society that have important implications for adult education.

### **Adult Education: Recent Developments**

Following the appointment of Adult Education Organisers at the end of the 1970s adult education began to slowly grow and develop. The Murphy Report (Murphy, 1973), the Kenny Report (Kenny, 1983) and more recently the Green Paper (DES, 1998) and White Paper (DES, 2000) all set a more systematic developmental path for adult education. The development of AONTAS and NALA as national organisations contributed significantly to the way adult education has developed.

The Government is committed to a major investment in adult education as part of the *National Development Plan 2000 to 2006* (Government of Ireland, 1999). People's skills, knowledge and understanding require regular updating and learning throughout life is necessary to ensure employability, personal fulfilment, inclusion in society and active citizenship. The importance of Lifelong Learning is now established. This government rhetoric fits well with adult educators. Or so it seems.

Funding for literacy and community education has been growing since the 1980s but it still remains a modest response in the context of the total education budget. The appointment of Adult Literacy Organisers and of Community Education Facilitators are welcome and important developments. They will go some way toward providing a significant catalyst for the further development of literacy and community education that has been systematically neglected. Any cutbacks in these areas will be seen as promises broken and damage will be done by the on again/off again funding under the pretence that there is a shortfall in public finances.

Second chance education has a number of important and innovative programmes: Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), the Education Equality Initiative (EEI), funding of Senior Traveller Training Centres, the Adult Education Guidance Initiative and Back to Education Initiative.

The BTEI, launched in 2002, has been the most important development in more recent years and is universally seen as an innovative programme that

assists adults who left school early, and others, to return to education with subsidised fees. It allows learners combine work and family with a return to learning while retaining Social Welfare entitlements. Its priority is the one million adults with less than upper second level education.

Adult education has gradually moved from being a field in which there were few facilities to where there are a number of adult education centres. It is difficult to over emphasise the importance of having clearly defined places in which adults can learn. If one wishes to go to school, primary or secondary, or go to university, there are identifiable places where these opportunities can be found. Unfortunately, it is still difficult to identify the place to which one can go to find ones lifelong learning opportunities. The school is here; the social welfare office is there; where is the adult education centre? Dedicated adult education centres would structurally and clearly identify the importance of adult education in our society.

Since its launch in 1999 twenty-five Adult Guidance Services have begun to deliver guidance to those participating in Adult and Community Education, as well as those in Literacy. They are responsible for helping those who have returned to education as adults to overcome obstacles they may encounter.

The Community Employment Scheme has allowed a large number of people engage in training and adult education courses of their own choice. The Partnership companies with Education Coordinators have been a major contributor to the development of adult education interventions in disadvantaged areas.

There has also been the development of a body of research in the field generating knowledge and reports about such topics as early school leaving, rural development, asylum seekers, access to higher education, men's groups, etc. There is now a body of research and experienced researchers contributing to our understanding of the field and supporting public policy.

Universities and colleges now have graduates in adult education from certificate to doctoral degree and this is an important indicator of the professional development of the field. At the entry level to higher education access courses, that now deliver access, are changing the age profile of the student body and there is a commitment to bring the mature student numbers to 15%.

This is admittedly a very positive and partial presentation of some recent developments. I wanted to paint this positive picture as a backdrop for some issues and problems that remain to be addressed.

### **The State of Adult Education**

Progress appears to be remarkable mostly because development started from a very low base. That VTOS survived for almost fifteen years is worth noting. The more important question is whether VTOS (in a country with historically low levels of unemployment) will continue to find a place in the new developments or will it be left to wither on the vine so to speak?

The new kid on the block – BTEI – has bureaucratic and administrative demands that tend to absorb too much time and energy at delivery level. Reporting procedures and form filling are overly structured and onerous and there is unclarity about the systems for drawing down funding. There is a concern with administrative and bureaucratic aspects of the programme that seem to have little to do with improving the experience of students and more to do with satisfying an insatiable bureaucratic system.

Sile De Valera, Minister of State for Education and Science at the recent Aontas Community Education Conference explained how it is not sufficient for adult educators seeking funding to assert the *worthwhile nature of the proposed programme*;

there needs to be accountability for that money and an end result, not just a process. It is becoming increasingly obvious that, if education sectors and initiatives within them are to continue to attract and grow their funding, outcomes must be documented in terms of the objectives achieved and the concrete gains for the participants. That means that high quality and detailed participant data have to be produced at the start of the programme, ...and at the finish. Funding of a project cannot be solely justified on the worthiness of the client group.

There is competition for scarce resources not only in adult education but between primary, secondary and higher education, the Minister continues. In order to access funds, the agencies and groups seeking funding need to have persuasive cases backed by strong evidence. Activity for its own sake is not enough. This sounds true as many evaluations of projects and programmes

emphasise the positive nature of the experience and rarely measure the extent to which a student achieved the goal of the programme, e.g. learned to read or write or got a job, etc.

This sounds eminently sensible until the appalling idea dawns that the essence of competition is that there are winners and losers. The powerful, the articulate, the learned win competitions. We must take seriously the recent statement by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform that "a dynamic liberal economy like ours demands flexibility and inequality in some respects to function" (Crowley, 2004). This inequality provides incentives, he continues. The implication is that those disadvantaged and unable to take advantage of education the first time round must now compete for a second chance and their disadvantage is an incentive to compete. A worthwhile experience is not enough and one suspects that good educational outcomes may also not be enough to satisfy the funding criteria of such a State. Lifelong learning is the mantra of this version of adult education.

As a counter position lifelong learning must be clearly established as a right. We know enough about the way advantage and wealth in our society are distributed and reproduced through the education system to continue to campaign for the right to lifelong learning for all. Lifelong learning needs to be reclaimed from the functional, the instrumental, the economic and the one-dimensional to mean a right to learn all that it is possible to learn.

Adults deserve the very best teaching and the most highly *qualified teachers*. Teaching adults is different to teaching children. Teaching on the basis of ones intuition or experience may produce some wonderful teachers but both intuition and experience may also lead one astray. Community Education Facilitators and Literacy facilitators are engaging in their own training programme. The inability of the State to acknowledge qualifications for working with adults is little short of neglectful. Attention needs to be given to the need for a trained professional group of adult educators bringing with them their experience and intuitions as well as being in touch with the ideas, concepts, traditions and skills of their chosen field.

The most important task for the State is to implement the recommendations outlined in the White Paper especially the proposal to establish Local Adult Learning Boards.

## **Adult Education and the State**

In discussing the relationship between the State and adult education there are two concerns. Firstly, local government is being restructured. Secondly, there is the relationship between the State and the economy. Both impact on adult education in different ways.

### *The State and Civil Society*

The arrival of partnership companies as key players in the education system has heralded a shift in the balance of power at local level. The absence of elected local representatives in Partnership companies allied to the strong representation from community groups has altered the dynamic between the bottom-up philosophy of community development and the top-down model of Government. Strong community involvement in the design and delivery of local projects and services is altering the link between local government and the community, between the government and the governed. In a recent review of a number of INTEGRA projects such a development is highlighted (Fleming & Murphy, 2003, p. 39). In addressing the EU driven demand for integration of services;

The task is to create a structure in which both the top-down of government/state and the bottom-up of local development can coordinate their efforts, resources and tasks. If this implies a complete restructuring of local government and its remit, then the task is at least named as that. The not so hidden agenda of projects...is a radical reform of local government.

Many projects in communities are forging a new and as yet undefined interface between the State and the community, a restructuring of the relationship between the State and civil society. It might be opportune for adult education as a field to explore the possibilities of linking with County Development Boards as structures that would also support and encourage adult education. It is important that adult education does not see itself as tied exclusively to one agency (VEC) but as part of a new restructured local government interested in the delivery of an integrated service.

### *The State and the Economy*

In looking at the relationship between adult education and the State there is a dilemma. On the one hand the State is responsible for most adult education funding. On the other there is a history of adult education residing in civil society, in that part of the community where the family and voluntary organisa-

tions are found. The State has particular difficulty acting in the interests of this community or civil society because, some would say, it has been seduced, maybe corrupted, by the economy to act in its interests. In this way the tendency of the State is to support a vision of lifelong learning and adult education that sustains the economy and values learning that involves job skills and upskilling. In fact the Government sets as a priority the learning that supports economic development. There is rhetoric of social inclusion and equality but that too has an economic intent. There is a contradiction between the inequality the system needs (according to the Minister for Justice) and the objective of social cohesion or social justice.

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

What is there over and above the economic? What kinds of learnings are possible and usually missing? There are the legitimate concerns that the State itself ought to have, i.e. the common good, justice, care, and the exercise of power in the interests of all its citizens. Secondly, there is civil society or that sector of society that concerns itself with family, community and voluntary organisations and is the locus for the potential expansion of democracy (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. vii). Adult education can concern itself with the state by promoting second chance, citizen education and equality. Adult education can also concern itself with the economy by teaching job skills, upskilling and indeed functional literacy. However, adult education in civil society concerns itself with learning for family, community and social involvements. Above all it concerns itself with increasing the potential for democratic interactions and making the system world more democratically accountable. Unfortunately, there is conflict between the system world (state and economy) and civil society. Many adult educators operate at the uncomfortable interface between the system world and the community.

It is not easy to ensure that qualifications and standardized frameworks, for example, do not become informed by system imperatives alone but are also informed by educational imperatives. In other words quality assurance is not just an administrative or bureaucratic demand but should also make sense on educational grounds. It is not surprising that it is these very learnings that the State finds uncomfortable, questioning of their position and critical of their

actions. Of course the State will not teach citizens to ask really critical questions about power in society, it will not teach people to protest about injustices or critique or transgress.

What I am proposing is the kind of adult education that speaks to people's highest aspirations; that aims at reaching the full potential of what it is to be an adult and opens the possibility that adults will be able to engage in the most significant kind of learning possible. What I am proposing is against seeing adults merely as workers, against seeing citizens only as consumers and clients; against the idea that hospital waiting lists are the only choice for a highly developed European nation. It questions the relationship between business and politicians and is able to see why it is not the legitimate business of the economic sector to fund political parties. It questions and interrogates the American invasion of Iraq aware of the complex range of political, ideological and economic dimensions of these actions. This learning questions why civil society is the location for so much violence and teaches how to take action against this situation.

Adult educators need the best support, training, education and qualifications so that the passion and commitment to a better community and society can be fuelled with ideas and knowledge and the skills required to bring about this goal for everyone. Adult education at its best helps to create spaces in which adults can discuss the kind of society in which we find ourselves; the kind of society we want to create and learn the skills required to bring about a society that is more just, more fair and where the state and the economy are subject to democratic accountability.

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

It would help to ensure that we do not join forces with what Camus called the pestilences:

Really it's too damn silly living in and for the plague. Of course a man should fight for the victims, but, if he ceases caring for anything outside that, what's the use of his fighting? (Camus, 1960, p. 209)



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