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The words 'Education' and 'Joy' do not sit naturally in the same sentence – at least that is what I have come to find. A few years ago, when our son was about eight or nine years old, I was preparing a PowerPoint slide for a talk on Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education. He read the slide and looked at me, his eyes brimming with fear and disappointment and said, 'You mean school goes on forever?' I reassured him that with luck and time off for good behaviour his sentence could be up in another eight years or so if that is what he wanted. School and Learning are not the same thing.

I have been teaching adults various courses on history, social analysis and study skills for well over a decade, but in 2016 I taught my inaugural 'Critical Skills: Reflective Practice' class to a group of first year undergraduates fresh from the Leaving Certificate. Four years and five cohorts later I have found that the most difficult thing for these students to do is to get them to engage, open up and allow some play to come into their learning. A criticism that is often levelled at students coming straight from secondary school is that they are not prepared, or do not know how to study at third level. There is a tendency on behalf of academics to think of students as needing to be deprogrammed. In fact, what they need is the space to decompress, to unwind and allow themselves to feel. Emotion is the key to unlocking their true learning self, however, emotion is the one thing that standardised testing in the second level system does not do.

I have asked critical skills groups if the idea of emotions and learning and feelings had ever come up in secondary school. The usual reply is that except for 'doss' subjects like Civic, Social, Political Education or Social, Environment and Health Education where mental health was talked about then feelings will not help you do well in exams. I asked about poetry and whether feelings were ever brought into English and the answer was a matter of fact 'If it wasn't on the paper or you couldn't get marks for it then no'. The teacher would say, "This poem or that poem might come up on the paper and if it does then this is how to answer it".

This observation is not a criticism about teachers. They have a job to do within a system that is designed to measure the academic worth of a child; they have no option but to 'teach to the test' as they say. But in the bigger scheme of things, who benefits? There are structures and systems in place that must be maintained and fed. Society and the economy rely on them. The education system depends on the daily grind funnelling kids into an ever-narrower range of interests and abilities until our third level system, business and industry are sated with the right kind of people in the right kind of jobs to keep our GDP on an upward curve. Well, the pandemic has shown us what the right kind of job really means, and it does not always come with a 500-point tag.

In Ireland, the Leaving Certificate acts as a sorting mechanism and nothing else. Four years' worth of students' Learning Journal reflective assignments processing their experiences of the exam has given me enough first hand source material to say that it is seen as a hazing process; a game of chance hoping that you get lucky and your stuff comes up; a memory test that is best forgotten as soon as it

is over and an ordeal that makes you question whether education has any meaning or relevance to you in later life. In our current Critical Skills class during a recent debate on whether Irish should no longer be a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools, there were strong arguments made on both sides. However, after the game was over, I asked for people's honest opinions and most people thought that it would be nice to speak Irish for reasons of identity and sentiment but in practical terms, the language is taught badly, this aspect needs a 'make over' and the time could be used more productively on another subject instead of being wasted "learning twenty poems off by heart just to forget them once the exam is over". Would this encourage you to want to learn or fall in love with the language?

Education systems in most Western countries imbue and reiterate a sense of competition, grading and pecking order. Points races, league tables, rankings, placings, the market, winner takes all; first hand up to answer the question, Miss, Miss, Miss, Sir, Sir, Sir and later, silently bent over books for the two years so you can 'get the points in the leaving'. What if it did not have to be like that? What if we did not have to establish a pecking order (collaboration and collegiality are two concepts that universities struggle to get their students grasp). What if learning was not something that had to have an exam at the end but was a process that was worth undertaking for its own sake, for your sake and out of curiosity. Can we imagine how this would be? The kids can imagine this – I am surprised every year by the fact that most of these students that I have encountered are eager to learn, want to be and do their best and every year when we look at the idea of 'success' they come back with ideas about sharing, caring for others, kindness, and concern for the planet and the future. Are these the lucky ones to be in a place to be able to think like this? What about the ones that do not make it?

I am convinced that Lifelong Learning is the key to the future of education and the multiple challenges that lie ahead in the Twenty-First century. However, perhaps the conversation around it is happening too late? Maybe it should be something that children are exposed to at my son's age. I do not know if school guidance counsellors ever mention late entry to university or mature student/part-time third level education to their pupils in second level. Probably not. 'If it ain't broke don't fix it'. It could throw up difficult conversations between the school and the parents, between parents (who just want the best for their children) and their teenage children who are in the process of emerging into adulthood. But if we could get this change right, parents could be the best example to their children by being adult students themselves. It is well known, to adult educators and adult students alike, how rewarding and transformational education as a mature student is. It would take a huge effort to reconfigure the education system from pre-school to post-grad for Lifelong Learning to have real meaning and take root in our culture. The first part would be to reimagine education as a fun and enjoyable process rather than a painful event and series of tasks completed, as an adventure playground rather than an obstacle course.