

## The Adult Learner 2009

The Irish Journal of  
Adult and Community Education



# The Adult Learner

## 2009

AONTAS

2nd floor, 83-87 Main Street,  
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

TELEPHONE: (01) 406 8220/1 FAX: (01) 406 8227

EMAIL: [MAIL@AONTAS.COM](mailto:MAIL@AONTAS.COM) | WEB: [WWW.AONTAS.COM](http://WWW.AONTAS.COM)

## Editorial Comment

It was January 1933 and Hitler was still some distance from assuming absolute power in Germany. A young boy was looking through the window of his home in Breslau from where he could see workers raise a huge flag on the roof of the local post office. The Swastika blew open to full length and the boy's mother explained in a voice quivering with emotion that this was a wonderful day when a new era of justice begins and a wonderful future awaits. Within three months the first concentration camp was established in the suburbs of Breslau. In the spring elections a majority of those elected in the city were Nazi. In the same month trade unions were dissolved, books by Thomas Mann and Emile Zola were banned. But the economy grew, industrial production rose, and by 1939 unemployment was eliminated. In November 1938 the carefully planned orders for *Kristallnacht* were obeyed in Breslau. Stalin's Gulag was already twenty years in existence and had already murdered more than Hitler's camps would ever manage. Seventy years later the boy at the window would ask: 'Can one ever tell these things and be understood?' (Davies, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. In Ireland too we have been attempting to understand tragic events.

Bruce Arnold's book *The Irish Gulag* is about the abuse of children in Irish institutions. Now to our horror we 'discover' that our country has operated a state and church-sponsored cruel and vicious system, with a system of internal exile where children (and women – Magdalene Sisters) were condemned and children 'guilty' by court order, to spend their childhood years in forced labour and brutality. A painful and troubling learning process has been taking place in which various people have attempted, with great success, to 'tell these things and be understood.' These events now determined to be true by the Ryan Commission Report may be the defining 'story of the year.'

---

<sup>1</sup> Davies, N. & Moorehouse, R. (2003). *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City*. London: Pimlico.

But other events compete for that title. The current economic depression has been made worse by a banking system, political system and land speculators who have brought about a social and economic crisis. How can ordinary people understand the scandal, corruption and gambling of financial institutions? How can anyone even contemplate a way forward?

These events raise important learning questions. What do we need to know in order to raise our children well and in order to also contribute to the economic survival of this country? How can we learn such things? Who will teach? Is there a task for an educational system here? Is the educational system also implicated? How can it not be? Who should be teaching about such things? And how? Who would prefer if we did not come to any understanding of these matters? Who will benefit from us not knowing? It raises questions both about who we were, who we are and who we would like to be for the future. It is scarcely imaginable, but it may be the case (and we have to imagine it) that, to paraphrase the sociologist Žižek who characterised ideology today as, ‘they knew it, but they did it anyway.’ This is the ‘awful truth!’

These events raise significant questions for adult educators and for our understanding of lifelong learning. So much learning is called for, so much to understand, so much to change.

A number of appeals have been made to raise a public memorial to the children of industrial schools. We already have memorials to the famine emigrants and the Duffy article in this edition highlights some of the possibilities of memorialising awful events in Japan and Cambodia. This is with a view to identifying a role for these memorials in supporting reconciliation and peace building in Ireland.

Tom Inglis in his book *Truth, Power and Lies* (2003) successfully unearthed the truth about the society in which we live in contrast to the lies that have been so much part of our self-understanding. In this edition Inglis highlights a counter possibility to the ‘awful truths’ that emerge from a consumer society and free market economy. In this more polemic piece he argues that the task is to reclaim community, engage in collaborative learning and redeem the possibilities that reside in a ‘good, fulsome and pleasurable life.’

Other topics also need to be addressed and David McCormack articulates a different take on the kinds of reflections that might be worthwhile for teachers and educators of adults. As teachers of adults (or if you prefer, as facilitators) we too have thoughts and feelings about the experiences of pedagogy. They are not often described, investigated or interrogated. The emotional dimension of teaching and learning is explored by means of an autoethnographic story written as an approach to reflective practice. This approach supports research into self and culture, the culture of adult education. The space this approach opens up between writer and reader is considered to be a potential site of meaning making. Teachers have feelings and experiences and narratives too that are rarely examined as in this example of reflective practice.

Amanda Slevin writes of Donegal to explain why 'Up here it's different' and disadvantaged. In divided communities, with deep fault lines, but with significant peace process funding, and adult education infrastructure has been built with learning centres and resources. Economic, environmental, social and political difficulties are examined by looking at two rural communities in East Donegal. The article explores the importance of the community and voluntary sector in responding to issues within communities and posits community development as an essential process in making change. The author outlines the interconnectedness of community development and community education and refers to the relevance of Freire's pedagogy for this work.

Rosarii Griffin in a reflective 'work in progress' describes her experiences working with teacher educators in Africa. The paper describes research projects developed in conjunction with the author's counterparts in Lesotho. Although the research project work is yet in its infancy, the author reflects on insights gained from working as an Irish person, in Africa, and the challenges posed to one's Eurocentric assumptions.

Three Irish adult educators raise hugely important practical questions. Alison McCallion describes how to bring Paulo Freire (or his ideas) into a learning group that visits the Botanic Gardens as part of a horticultural course and how her experiences at an art exhibition on two different occasions (both in Ireland and Sweden) impacted on her work of as a teacher. Valerie McGrath explores how the Andragogy of Malcolm Knowles continues to be important for practitioners in Ireland. From a background in family literacy Mary Flanagan explores the connections with active citizenship.

In a new development for the journal there is a brief Comment Section. The important intervention in the previous issue invited adult educators to be more critical of theorising in our field and not be ‘outside the remit of our own critical positioning.’ A group of authors take up the invitation and the Comment Section attempts to create a more dialogic dimension in the journal.

Finally, as Editor for this year, I want to express generous acknowledgement and appreciation for Eileen Curtis who has edited *The Adult Learner* since 2004.

**TED FLEMING**

NUI Maynooth

*Editor*

*Editorial Board*

Bernie Brady, Aontas

Sandra Fisher, Dublin Institute of Technology

Dolores Gilhooley, Waterford Institute of Technology

Rob Mark, Queen’s University Belfast

Jennifer Gunning, Aontas

Stephen O’Brien, NUI Cork