

*‘Empowering Adult Educators: Consideration of How We Can Create Sustainable
Communities of Practice for Critical Reflection to Develop Transformative Teaching
Practices’*

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To my family, it has been a busy year for all of us with lots of ups and downs along the way. We were all on our own educational journey's. All were different journeys with their own challenges. I promised if you could do it, I could do it to. I am proud of your understanding and encouragement throughout, reminding me to never give up on myself.

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Abstract

This research explores how critical reflection in community of practices can drive transformative learning, promoting personal development and fostering socially just practices.

The research question 'Empowering Adult Educators: Consideration of How We Can Create Sustainable Communities of Practice for Critical Reflection to Develop Transformative Teaching Practices,' was investigated using Participatory Action Research through collaborative enquiry as part of a CoP. The aim is to co-create knowledge, critically reflecting on our practices leading to action for change.

The cyclical nature of action research was structured around Stephen Brookfield's four lenses of critical reflection: student feedback, colleagues' perspectives, personal reflections, and educational theories. The literature review covered theories from prominent scholars like John Dewey, Donald Schon, Stephen Brookfield, Jan Fooks, Jack Mezirow, Paulo Freire, Lave and Wenger, and Barbara Larrivee, focusing on differentiating critical reflection from general reflection and its role in transformative learning.

The study concluded the value of critical reflection for personal and professional growth and development. Effective professional development requires a supporting culture and relevant and engaging strategies. Vital to the success of this is flexible organisational policies. Recommendations include encouraging the understanding of critical reflection through structured models for reflection. Fostering a culture of critical reflection within the work environment through the implementation of communities of practice and professional development programs.

The research underscores the importance of critical reflection in transforming educational practices through enhancing professional development. This will ultimately contribute to more inclusive and socially conscious teaching methodologies.

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Acronyms

COP	Community of Practices
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRP	Critical Reflective Practice
CRP	Critical Reflective Practice
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Board Ireland
FET	Further Education and Training
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
LOETB	Laois Offaly Education and Training Board
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PD	Professional Development

Introduction

As part of my ongoing critical enquiry as a reflective practitioner working in a Further Education and Training Centre in Ireland, I have become interested over time to explore the potential of collective spaces for critical reflection. More specifically, I aim to create an awareness of how critical reflection, when conducted as part of Communities of Practice with colleagues, can lead to transformative learning. This approach seeks to promote our own professional development, implement teaching practices that are more socially just, and empower learners to engage critically with the world around them as agents of their own learning and social change.

From these considerations, I developed my research question:

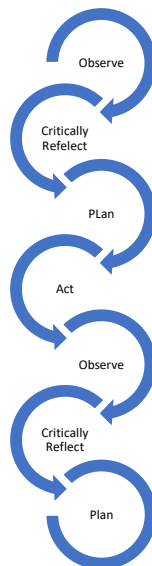
‘Empowering Adult Educators: Consideration of How We Can Create Sustainable Communities of Practice for Critical Reflection to Develop Transformative Teaching Practices’

Using a method of action research as the overall structure for the thesis. I used collaborative inquiry through the creation of a community of reflective practitioners in the environment in which I work and teach. The aim was a co-creation of knowledge between the researcher and the participants critically reflecting together to provide the opportunity to consider our practices, identify problems, implement solutions and reflect on outcomes.

To demonstrate the cyclical nature of action research instead of using the traditional positivist thesis format I have structured this thesis based on the cycles of action research rather than chapters. As part of this methodology I have integrated critical reflection through Stephen Brookfield’s four lenses, in this context Lens 1. Student eyes is represented through reflections from practitioner’s feedback from their students. Lens 2. Colleagues perspectives,

through the creation of Community of Practices offers the opportunity to examine our practices as a collective. Lens 3. Personal perspectives came from my own personal reflections throughout the production of the thesis. Lens 4. Educational Theories is formed as part of the literature review that was undertaken. Each part of the action research cycle: Observe, Critical Reflection, Planning and Acting is designed to build on the previous which seeks to emphasize the continuous improvement leading to deeper understanding (Kemmis, 2005)

Table 1. Action Research Cycle (Kemmis, 2005)



Cycle 1. Observe

Through a personal critical reflection, I consider my own career transition. I reflect on the value of working as a collective using critical reflection towards transforming our practices to improve the learner's experiences and the difficulties I encountered leading to the formation of my topic of research.

Cycle 2. Critical Reflection

Literature review

I undertook a comprehensive literature review encompassing theories on critical reflection, transformational learning theories, community of Practices and professional Development. This review focused on prominent theorists including John Dewey, Donald Schon, Stephen Brookfield, Jan Fooks, Jack Mezirow, Paulo Freire, Lave and Wenger and Barbra Larrivee.

Reflection Versus Critical reflection: I considered the rich history of reflective practice in education dating back to John Dewey in the late 1890s. Considering how the word reflection is often over used and can be challenging to find adequate definitions. Differentiating critical reflection from reflective practices involved considering our experiences from a variety perspective.

Critical Reflection as a vehicle for transformative learning: The process of critical reflection allows for deep analysis of our assumptions which leads to the shift in our frame of references. Mezirow (1991) agrees critical reflection becomes transformative when we revise our assumptions and act on our new insights. Freire's (1970) process of Conscientization is key to developing critical awareness transforming our interpretations. Brookfield (2012) further recognizes that through critical reflection we challenge the structures that seek to oppress us, Freire (1974) suggests this is key to social change.

Creating Community of Practices: Research into the development communities of practice to promote discourse for critical enquiry. Recognition that learning is a social process and we can learn from each other through imitation and modelling. Lave and Wenger (1991) consider how community of practices are embedded in situational learning. The members of CoPs can engage in a collective learning through discourse and this is an essential element for transformative learning to occur. Freire (1974) highlights how supportive dialogue develops confidence assisting us to question our beliefs.

Professional Development: Consideration was given to the importance of professional development as a key component of critical reflective CoPs. The changing landscape of the adult education sector was investigated through governmental and local policy documents.

Cycle 3. Planning

Methodology

The research study focused on exploring and developing communities of reflective practitioners among adult educators. The study demonstrated the instinctive nature of educators to learn from each other (Needham, 2016). Qualitative research through action research methods encouraged critical thinking through the CoP meetings. My role became not just the researcher but also a co-learner, in a natural context, I was living the ‘what, how and why’ (Needham, 2016).

Cycle 4: Act

Development of Communities of Practice

As I work within an adult education institution, it was appropriate to use the work place as a site of research as this allowed for a reflexive praxis and interpretative stance. The research involved the development of a community of practice of reflective practitioners. The choice

of participants was based on their educational background and willingness to engage together as a group in critical reflection. The final CoP consisted of myself as the researcher and co-participant and four colleagues from within the center. I followed this up with three conversational interviews with colleagues allowing for a deeper insight into the understanding and issues with taking part in CoP meetings. The use of interviews as ethnographic research provided an alternative view for the reasons behind our actions (Robson, 2006).

Cycle 5: Observe

Reflections from Community of Practices

From my own personal reflections and observation, I considered the effectiveness of action research when creating a CoP to encourage critical reflection as part of professional development. I highlight how informal reflections happen frequently among colleagues and question if these go far enough to lead to meaningful changes in our teaching practices. I acknowledge the challenges faced when organizing CoP meetings as a significant personal learning experience. Feedback from participants was considered providing valuable insights in to their experiences. It was reassuring to note that participants found it helpful to know they were not alone through their shared experiences. Issues were highlighted ranging from time constraints, lack of dedicated spaces as well as feelings of impostership.

Cycle 6: Critical Reflection

Concluding Discussion

In the concluding discussion I consider critical reflection as essential for personal and professional development. I highlight the often confusing understanding of critical reflection. Failure to engage in critical reflection can diminish the transformative nature of critical reflection, leading to only superficial compliance. The collaborative efforts of professional

development are highlighted as often been overwhelming and demanding in our busy schedules. Creating supportive cultures is essential to promote critical engagement. This can be challenging when there are inconsistencies in policies across educational establishments. I support the need for professional development to be relevant and responsive to the needs of educators and their learners. I reflect on the need for relevant strategies to be more specific to critical reflection and communities of practice.

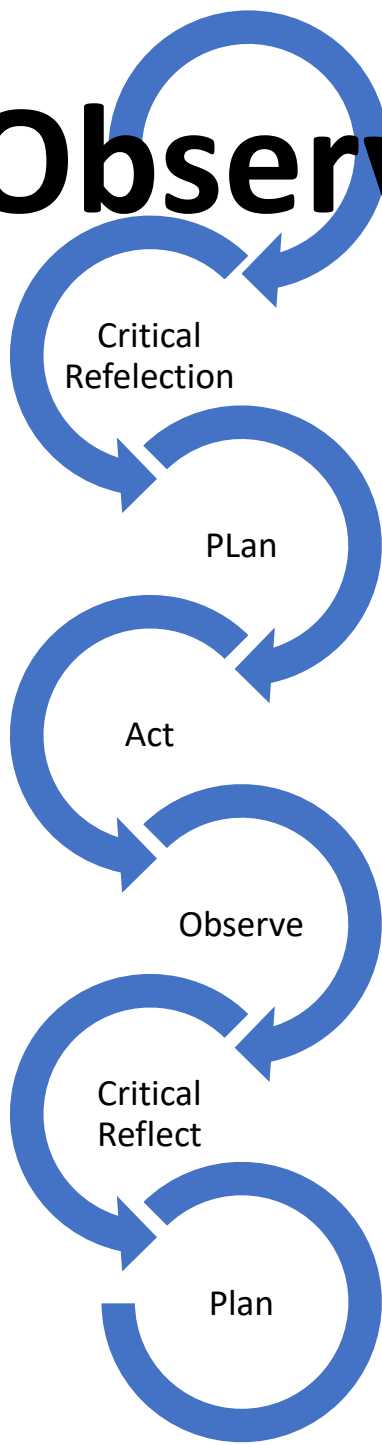
Cycle 7. Planning

Recommendations

In summary the recommendations considered are necessary to promote critical reflection through CoP include, the importance of fostering a cultural of critical reflection among adult educators. Considering the implementation of professional development programs focused on developing understanding of critical reflection. Encouraging the use of structured models for critical reflection using Schon's in action reflection and Brookfield's four lens of critical reflection. Establishing CoPs to provide the space for the deeper reflection embedding this into the practices of adult educators. Essential to this is developing flexible policies to support change and freeing up time for critical reflection.

Observe

Cycle 1: Observe
Research Background
Rationale



Cycle 1. Observe

1.1 Background Rationale

My own personal career has involved transitioning from a career as an early year's educator to working as an adult educator. This journey has represented a significant shift in teaching dynamics, practices and methodologies. My own engagement in lifelong learning and professional development has been integral to this.

Early year's education in Ireland has had significant developments in practices particularly with the legal requirement to have formal qualifications. There have been huge strides in aiming to professionalise this sector with the introduction of the mandatory requirement of a minimum QQI 15 qualification in Early learning and Care similarly to the professionalization of the adult educator sector with requirements to not just have course specific degrees but also further educational degrees accredited with the Teaching Council of Ireland (Teaching Council: Registration 2016). This mirrors my own educational journey which has not been the typical linear route. As a result, I have a unique perspective for the cultivation of lifelong learning. The overlapping element to both working as an early year's educator and adult educator is important for my own continuous and sustained critical reflective practices.

I am acutely aware of the importance of engaging adult learners in critical thinking, encouraging them to understand the 'why' of their actions and practices. Encouraging adult learners to engage in reflective practice has allowed me to consider my own critical reflective practices. Something I sensed I often fell short on. While I do believe I used reflection daily in my teaching practices, this was only on the surface and I was not using a deep critical enquiry that would support me to transform my practices towards analysis and change to meet all the diverse needs of adult learners. I considered myself as a fraud encouraging students in reflective practice without fully engaging myself. As adult educators there is a

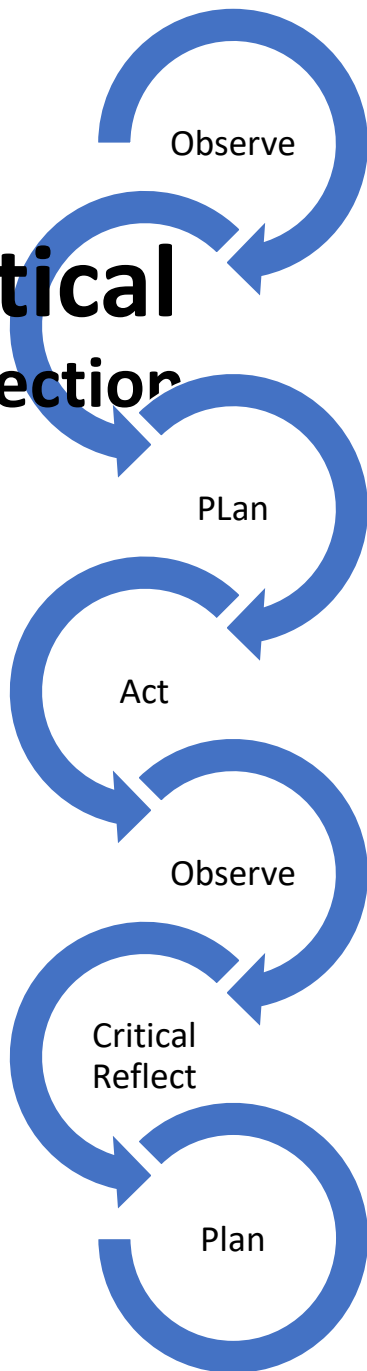
need to move away from a 'do as I say' encouraging and mentoring learners through personal experience. Brookfield & Preskill (2015: p. 6) would suggest 'Modelling your commitment – Walking the Talk'.

Passive engagement in reflective practices happens every day, when we are in a classroom responding on the spot to the needs of learners we are involved in Schon's in action reflective process, discussing the day's events in the staff room, the momentary thoughts when we are in the car of what we could have done differently. Communication with colleagues is a vital component to our development as adult educators. Engaging in discussions with colleagues encourages critical reflection. Creating communities of reflective practitioners can create a space to allow for critical enquiry. Brookfield (2017) and Wenger (1998) would agree the critical reflection is most effective when it is a shared collective endeavour. Communities of Practice serve as collaborative networks through a process of sharing and reflecting on our practices supporting each other's professional development. As practitioners even when we work in the isolation of the classroom, we are all interconnected as colleagues, sharing our experiences and knowledge promotes collective learning and growth.

Adult learners have diverse backgrounds and learning experiences, understanding individual learners is crucial to our own self-development and has a role in informing our educational teaching practices. Through engaging in critical reflective practices, we have the opportunity to develop a discourse where we challenge our own preconceptions, values and beliefs. Paulo Freire's theories on education and social transformation underscore the importance of these practices. In communities of reflective practitioners, we can support each other to make sense of our experiences, thus allowing us to develop a self-awareness, which is more than just beneficial to us, but also students. Incorporating Freire's ideas into our reflective practices can amplify the potential for social transformation to occur. Freire (1970) highlights that education should not just be the transmission of knowledge, we should seek to develop a

social consciousness. This is achieved when we become aware of our own social reality through reflection with others (Freire, 1970). By creating opportunities for open and constructive dialogue, we are moving from conversations to facilitating meaningful dialogue. A space is created to have open exchanges of views, actively listening and encouraging respectful questioning and challenging individual perspectives. True transformative learning can occur in this reflective space, allowing practitioners to shift their way of thinking and doing. Mezirow (1997) makes the case that through engagement in disorienting dilemmas with others as part of critical reflection we can experience a shift in our frame of reference, as educators this assists us in creating more inclusive and integrating practices. Communities of reflective practitioners can be the catalysts for transformative learning. What we can create is more than a meeting of minds but developing a culture of enquiry where the status quo is open to challenge and examination allowing for continuous professional development.

Critical Reflection



Cycle 2: Critical Reflection
Literature Review

Cycle 2. Critically Reflect: Literature Review

2.1 Reflection Versus Critical Reflection

We spend much of our day thinking and acting without an awareness of our thoughts. In its simplest form reflection can be seen as an opportunity that causes us to contemplate on our experiences or events. Reflection involves us retelling our experiences, we can consider our actions and how we feel about them. Reflection can be used as a means of self-development; we can gain valuable insights and make connections. Reflection involves an examination of our personal experiences; critical reflection is embedded in these experiences in the social contexts around us (Bolton, 2001). During reflection we are afforded the opportunity to unpack our emotions and feelings (Jacoby, 2010).

There is a deep history of reflective practice in the field of education. John Dewey was one of the first educators to consider the issue of reflective practice going back as far as the late 1890s. In his pioneering work *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process* published in 1933, Dewey defined reflective thinking as taking part in active, persistent and careful consideration of our beliefs or knowledge. Here he discussed how education is more than just gaining knowledge, but is about developing habits of thought and inquiry, leading to problem solving. Dewey asserted that reflection was central to fostering intellectual growth and allowed us to make informed judgements we are according to Dewey 'assessing the grounds (Justification) of one's beliefs' (Dewey, 1933: p.9). He considered the importance of reflection as a way of making meaning from our experiences. Dewey also stressed that reflection should not be done in isolation and can be initiated from dialogue with others, we are opening ourselves to learning from different perspectives (Dewey, 1933).

Donald Schon developed on the early work of Dewey. Schon (1983) discussed how as professionals we engage in reflective practice in real time situations, we are responding to complex and uncertain situations. From his research on 'reflection on action' Schon considers how we review our experiences after they have happened, thus allowing for analysis and insights into our actions. Schon makes the point that as educators we are often relying on our intuition and refining our knowledge through the process of reflection and adaptation from our learning.

It is important that we give consideration that reflection is a word that is overused in the education sectors often without full understanding of its true meaning. Hatton and Smith concur that definitions of reflection, especially critical reflection are often 'inappropriate or inadequate' (1995: p. 38). Rodgers (2000) would concur with this idea that reflection has suffered a loss of meaning. Ecclestone advises the need to 'Offer much clearer accounts of different interpretations and values which underpin reflection and to structure its forms and focuses more coherently than we do at present' (1996: p. 152.). Most recently reflection has become embedded as part of the learning process in the areas of healthcare, social care and childcare. We have become obsessed in creating 'Reflective Practitioners' and yet during much of the assessment process learners are encouraged to engage in reflection, reflecting on their skills - what went well, what didn't go well, how they could improve. Many of the modules I facilitate have some form of a learner record, where learners are expected to detail what they did while on work practice, we ask them to consider their strengths and weaknesses. We have numerous buzz words used to explain reflection: 'reflective practice', 'critical reflection', 'reflection on action', 'reflection in action', 'self-awareness', 'inquiry', 'introspection' and we can find ourselves using these words interchangeably (Herbert, 2015). Farrell (2012) would suggest that reflection and reflective practice are so popular in education that they are now mandatory terms widely used. Herbert (2015) argues that when

these terms are used without understanding the meanings can greatly differ from student to student and teacher to teacher. It can be difficult to clarify the meanings of reflection and critical reflection the theories are overlapping concepts, bringing a kaleidoscope of meanings (Beauchamp, 2006), there is a wide range of concepts and strategies involved. Brookfield (2015) agrees that understanding critical reflection can be confusing, the topic is diverse across a huge amount of research and literature.

Here, the aim is to demystify both definitions of 'reflection and critical reflection'. From the wide amount of literature considered (Brookfield, Dewey, Fooks, Mezirow, Schon) we have come to understand that reflection involves thinking deeply about an experience or action. Reflection focuses on the immediate details of a task or problem. Mezirow (1991) would suggest that reflection is critiquing our assumptions on the content of an issue, the process is problem solving. Proposed by Schon reflection is an ongoing process, that occurs in the moment 'reflection in action'. The action of reflective practice is to review our inner processes of our thinking. Kolb (1984) would agree that individuals acquire knowledge and skills through reflecting on personal experiences. Reflection can be more practical and often happens spontaneously, where rapid thinking is required. Reflection is a 'stepping back to ponder what has transpired' (Raelin, 2002: p. 66). Reflection is most often used in education as an assessment process involving recall of events or skills demonstrations, giving personal consideration to how the individual felt and identifying learning from the situations. In essence reflection is about personal growth and learning from past experiences. Most often reflection occurs every day, as part of our professional thinking process when we are journaling, debriefing or as part of our personal contemplations.

Informally we spend time chatting with friends discussing the day's events, professionally we talk with colleagues share our experiences, driving home from work we often find our thoughts wandering. Reflection according to Fooks is one way of approaching our life and

actions, in this sense reflection can be seen as a 'Compassionate engagement with the worlds dilemma's' (2015: p. 105) As educators we are aware of our practices, intentions and their outcomes, we plan and assess after considering our student's needs. Reflection is a mental process, Moon (1999) points out it has purpose, we provide feedback, reflecting on what was done well and what areas need improvement. In these everyday thoughts, we are aware of how we feel, what we think and how we need to act. When faced with a problem or when things don't go the way we expected, we consider the issues, imagine the alternatives of what we should have done or could have done. As suggested by Mezirow (1998) we can find ourselves reflecting on reflecting. However, if we were only to use a reflective process, we are according to Bolton (2010) missing out on all the possibilities available to us.

Every day we are gaining insights and making connections, but this can be where it often ends, our thoughts stay exactly where they are in our heads. Mezirow (1998) would agree during everyday reflection we are not moving beyond these thoughts to making assessments and this is what differentiates 'reflection' from 'critical reflection'. In these momentary thoughts we find ourselves simply moving on without ever changing or adapting into the future, we accept the status quo without question. It can be argued that these first thoughts and insights that we have are a good starting point to a simple reflective approach. As Fooks (2015) points out it is useful when we become aware of issues and assumptions around us, but without a detailed analysis we are not considering how these assumptions impact social contexts. Reflection is not the end but the beginning, we can use reflection as 'the vehicle' to critical reflection and transformation (Rodgers, 2000). Freire (1970) would agree that from a process of critical reflection we can develop an awareness of the social, political and economic contradictions that oppress us allowing us to take action to create a broader social change impacting the learners, educators, educational institutions and society as a result.

Moving towards critical reflection involves looking at our experiences from different perspectives. During critical reflection we begin as Schon (1983) suggests thinking more deeply about the 'why' of our actions. The importance of critical reflection is to not be afraid of analysing complex issues and being open to having our beliefs challenged 'difficult questions may need to be asked' (Jacoby, 2010). In critical reflection we can take a step back, take more notice, challenge our assumptions. A key to this can be in the sharing of our perspectives with others and being open to different perspectives and solutions that may come about as a result of this. Freire acknowledges that this is where practical experiences and critical reflection intersect, they allow us to consider the broader questions needed for social change (de Oliveira, et al. 2016). Critical reflection involves a deep examination, we are more than describing our experiences or incidents, it involves critical analysis. 'enables us to overcome distance between the world as it is and the world as we think about it' (de Oliveira et al: 2016). Mezirow (1990) discusses the need to question our assumptions and beliefs, allowing us to explore and seek solutions and alternatives. When as Mezirow suggests we do this we can consider the impacts on the wider social and political contexts and begin to move towards transformative learning. Critical reflection can add moral and ethical criteria, consideration is given to equality and social justice. Freire (1974) makes the case for a cycle of social change that can be achieved through the praxis of reflecting and taking action, this enables us to make informed changes promoting the equality and social change we seek. Fisher (2003) would concur that when we critically analyse the political and social contexts, we interrupt patterns of inequality in the wider social worlds.

(Mezirow, 1990, Fooks, 2015) make the point that developing an examination of assumptions leads to change; in doing so we develop an awareness of the power that exists from ourselves and in the social contexts in which we work. The key component of a critical reflective process is first to be self-aware of our own thoughts, bias and motivations.

Following this is the ability to challenge the dominant narratives that surround us, question and consider alternative practices. Freire highlights that our life situations are at the starting point for raising our social consciousness these real-life critical considerations assist us in overcoming the obstacles that oppress us requiring us to adapt our ways of thinking resulting in changes to the structures that can dehumanise us (1974). It is important to reflect on these alternatives consider all possibilities, most importantly there must be a willingness to be open to change from what we have learned.

Reflection and critical reflection are not mutually exclusive, they are based on similar theory, and we go through the same thought process. According to Fooks critical reflection is a subset of reflective practice. Critical reflection is reflection done well (Fooks, 2015). Critical reflection is more implicit, engaging in critical reflection we are intentionally reflecting with a purpose, and because of this we have a potential to change (Mezirow, 1998).

Critical reflection can be delineated from reflection as being problem posing at its core. During critical reflection we are moving towards a critique of our presuppositions. Critical reflection is analysing the preconceived assumptions with the goal of increasing our receptiveness to other ways of thinking (Gray, 2007, Raelin, 2002, Reynolds, 1998). This involves deeper critical thinking, considering the impacts of our behaviours, questioning assumptions, examination of our values and recognising the theories of our understanding. As part of a careful deliberation of our practices this leads to new understandings, developing greater insight and encouraging greater responsibility for our future actions (Dewey 1910, Fendler, 2003, Zeichner, 1981). Freire (2005) debates that when we engage in real world problems, we develop a critical consciousness of social justice, power dynamics and the historical contexts of the world that seek to oppress educators and learners. Investigation of such topics that impact our lives and community generate the moment for change. While

both reflection and critical reflection are informed by experience, Dewey (1910) points out that critical reflection is informed by theory received from knowledge.

While reflection is an invaluable process and should always remain at the core of our professional practices, allowing us to think deeply about our practices. Engaging in critical reflection creates the opportunity for close analysis and evaluation of the issues that impact us, we must be self-aware and understand our own social and contextual perspectives and that of others, appreciating the complexities of issues and the solutions to problems. It must be emphasised the importance of acting on the insights we have gained. Moving towards adapting and changing our behaviours will only then allow for us to truly transform our practices. The goal should not be to just know and understand our past experiences but a move towards improving our future actions. In order to critically reflect we must first be able to reflect (Fooks, 2015) reflective practice focuses our thinking. Freire would add that this deep critical thinking drives social change (1970).

The use of critical thinking as a tool within the learning process, will develop the skills of adult educators and learners, we become more aware of the ideologies that constrain our thought processes, those ingrained in our psyche since childhood influenced by the perceived norms of society in which we have grown up. Brookfield (2005) advocates for overcoming the racial, feminist, sexist, political and cultural boundaries that are present around us. As co-learners the educator and student can challenge these assumptions and deconstruct them. The educator is supporting learners to relate concepts to their knowledge and understanding, the goal for Brookfield is to create independent thinkers, who can go on to make good moral decisions not just in the classroom but throughout wider society.

Brookfield (2017: p.5) has identified three types of assumptions, firstly, our paradigmatic assumptions on how we see how the world works, these are so deeply ingrained over our

lifetime that we are often oblivious to them. Secondly, prescriptive assumptions, how we believe we and others should behave or act, how things have always been done. These can be difficult to adapt if we are unwilling to try new approaches. Thirdly, our casual assumptions can be seen as the practices we engage in regularly giving little thought to their effectiveness.

The use of Brookfield's theory of the four critical lenses as a method allows us to uncover and challenge these assumptions. The key to success is to uncover our epistemological views, critically reflecting on our beliefs, knowledge, and opinions.

The four lenses allow us to critically reflect from a variety of viewpoints.

Lens 1: Student's Eyes, Brookfield ascertains this to be the most important view, it is essential to critically reflect on how our teaching impacts our students from their perspective, or as Brookfield states 'we are largely working in the dark' (Brookfield, 2017: p. 62). The difficulty here is, many educators can come from a place of educational superiority, they have had relatively good experiences of the education system, often predominately upper- or middle-class backgrounds where the importance of educational attainment was part of the culture around them, this then could be considered that it would make it difficult to understand and empathize with a learner who brings with them fears and anxieties of their educational experiences, one which they have never directly experience themselves. This only serves to highlight the importance to look to our students for their experiences of how our practices impact them. Seeking student feedback is essential to this process, we must be prepared to ask open-ended questions and be willing to hear the responses from students, to critically reflect on our assumptions, and be willing to adjust our teaching practices in response.

For me it has been a transformative experience to become a student to walk in my students' shoes. It has allowed me the scope to examine my own assumptions of learners, I have been

reminded that not all learners are interested or need to be actively involved in classroom discussions, quiets learners who often I would have viewed as apathetic or disengaged might be more comfortable to listen and take in experiences from others.

Lens 2: Colleague's Perspectives, feedback from our peers can provide us with essential unseen and unnoticed insight into our teaching practices, and we can learn from those working alongside us. Brookfield highlights the need for reflection to take part as a group collective. We can learn from each other when we are open to sharing our experiences. Good teaching practices can develop from supporting each other, considering others' perspectives, and providing constructive feedback. It is important that we develop opportunities where we are secure in discussing what is happening in our classroom. 'Helping people learn what to do' Brookfield (2017: p. 115). Reflecting with our colleagues opens us to different perspectives and points of view, we must be willing to challenge our own assumptions. Brookfield would suggest that working together removes any of the isolation we can encounter as teachers.

Brookfield's theory is central to my own research, every practitioner engages in informal reflective practice, we talk to our colleagues every day in the hallways, carparks and staffrooms, we mull over in our mind the day's events. Now imagine if we could create that reflective space to be intentional in our critical reflections, time to examine our practices and their impacts as a community of practitioners we could share, learn and support each other to underpin what we are doing well and develop new practices to support our learners.

Lens 3: Personal Experience, encourages us to analyse our own experiences. What has worked in the past, what hasn't and what can we learn from this? Recalling our own personal experiences in education can be illuminating here.

Lens 4: Using a variety of **educational theories** to provide us with different perspectives that we can utilise to assist us in implementing effective teaching practices (Brookfield, 2017). Understanding the theory and the relationship between our practices and actions is made easier when we can connect it as Brookfield suggests to something we are already familiar with, ‘we are all theorists, we take action based on what we think will work in different circumstances’ (Johanson and Brookfield, 2010).

In summary reflection is a process of recollection, recalling of the events or incidents. Describing the events or situations in detail. Evaluating and assessing the outcomes and how we feel about the experience. Finally, identifying what was learned from the experience. Critical Reflection involves questioning our own assumptions, beliefs and values and challenging that of others. Analysis and consideration to the broader social and political contexts and the power dynamics at play. Looking at different perspectives and exploring alternative actions and understanding the implications of our actions and others on the broader social and political contexts. The key differences are shown for contrast in the table below.

Table 2. key comparisons of reflection and critical reflection

	Reflection	Critical Reflection
Analysis	Focuses is on personal experience and immediate learning.	Deeper analysis of assumptions, power dynamics and the broader context.
Scope	Based on individual experiences and personal growth.	Consideration to social, cultural, and institutional influences.
Purpose	Growth of personal insight and development.	Transformative change through challenging and questioning the status quo.
Approach	Often descriptive and narrative, informal, individual.	Analytical and evaluative questioning and challenging the norms and practices.
Application	Everyday situations, in action journaling and personal contemplation.	Professional and academic, critical conversations with peers. Such as communities of practice.

2.2 Critical reflection as a vehicle for Transformative learning.

Critical reflection is an essential component in facilitating transformative learning. Critical reflection enables us to critically examine our beliefs and assumptions, ultimately this can lead to a transformation of not just our own views but also in worldwide views.

As I have previously discussed, during critical reflection we examine and analyse our assumptions, values and beliefs, from this deep analysis a process of transformation can occur. Cranton (2016) would argue that this alone does not guarantee a transformative learning process, true transformation occurs in the ability of the individuals to have a revision in their 'habit of the mind'. We can experience a shift in our frame of reference, this untimely can lead to more inclusive, discriminating, open and reflective perspectives. 'Reflective learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic or otherwise invalid' (Mezirow, 1991: p. 19). Reflection often occurs when something unexpected happens, a disorienting dilemma, we are met with a situation that does not fit with what we know and understand. We can reject this or question our assumptions, critically examining our expectations revising them and acting on them.

Transformation occurs when we are willing to change our perspectives, this leads to more 'inclusive, discriminative and integrative experiences (Mezirow, 2000: p15). Likewise, Conscientization as referred to by Freire (1970) is about developing critical awareness of the realities that surround us in society. We develop a deep understanding of social and political contradictions, the ability and confidence to act on these, transforms our interpretations.

Mezirow (1997) highlights that critical reflection is essential for transformative learning to occur. During critical reflection we become more aware and question our assumptions and beliefs. The deeper understanding gained as part of critical reflection fosters a sense of agency, it empowers us to take control of our own learning and teaching practices, critical

reflection enables us to make informed decisions. Brookfield (2012) asserts that critical reflection assists us in recognising the existence of power dynamics at play both internally and externally in our social and professional environments. In agreement Freire (1974) recognises that by questioning the social structures, inequalities and power dynamics that set out to oppress us are at the root cause of oppression, critically evaluating these oppressions empowers action for change. This can give us the confidence to challenge such assumptions that can hinder professional and personal growth and development. 'Adults learn to challenge the dominant ideology, uncover power and contest hegemony' (Brookfield, 2012: p. 131) from this we develop a greater sense of agency over decisions made through problem solving. The cycle of critical reflection and action Freire makes the case is essential for social change to occur (1993). When engaging in critical reflection we are encouraged to critical think about our experiences, during this we can develop a higher order of thinking, refining skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. King (2002) found that critical reflection is linked to critical thinking skills, developing self-awareness, being open minded to new ideas, logically examining different perspectives including being aware of our thought process and their impacts on decision making. These skills are an essential requirement for transformative learning to occur.

I have discussed previously that critical reflection is not just a cognitive process but is linked to our emotions and how we feel. Cranton (2016) highlights that through critical reflection we make meaning of our experiences, analysis and evaluation is based on prior experiences. As part of critical reflection engagement, we have the scope to make sense of and process our feelings and emotions and the impacts on us professionally and personally, this is an essential factor in transforming our thinking. Taylor (2008) highlights the importance of recognising the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning from critical reflection to facilitate transformative learning. However, the process of transformation is not complete until we

have acted on that learning (Mezirow, 2003: p. 3). Transformative learning involves a deep shift in perspective (Cranton, 2016). Freire (1974) emphasised that reflection without action is solely verbalising our opinions and action without reflection is simply activism without understanding.

2.3 Developing sustainable Communities of Practices

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are a concept embedded in social learning theory, as put forward by Albert Bandura learning is a social process, he confers that people learn from each other through imitation and modelling similar behaviours. Essential to this process is an optimal environment to promote social interactions. The aim of CoPs is to develop deep learning and knowledge acquisition between the members. CoPs bring together diverse perspectives which can encourage problem solving through critical thinking. New ideas, innovations and ways of thinking are generated.

Lave & Wenger's (1991) Situated learning suggests that learning takes place in the same context in which it is applied. They are in agreement with Bandura that learning is best as a social construct and most effective in an environment of community engagement, stemming from authentic practice-based activities. Lave & Wenger go on to define CoPs as a group of people who take part in collective learning activities, through a shared human endeavour (1991). Barab et. al (2005) proposes a definition for a CoP as being a persistent and sustained social network of individuals, who share and develop overlapping knowledge, sets of beliefs, values, history and experiences all focused on a common practice.

Lave & Wenger have established some key characteristics of CoPs. Members have a shared interest that brings them together as a group. There is shared relationship within the group. Genuine interactions between members, who are able to communicate their experiences through stories and knowledge sharing (1991).

Discourse with others is important, the ability to share our experiences and values with a trusted and comfortable group of our peers, will act as a stimulant for critical questioning (Cranton, 2016). The requirement to have open engagement in discourse in CoPs is central for transformative learning to occur. Freire (1998) considers that through dialogue we are offered the opportunity to share and exchange ideas as part of a dialogic learning process. In this way critical reflection becomes a shared experience, collaborating we can analyse and evaluate shared experiences, this Freire contends fosters agency and collective responsibility. The process of learning and co-participation does not occur in the heads of individuals (Hanks, Lave and Wenger, 1991: p13). Dialogue as suggested by Freire (1974) is the essence of education as an action of freedom, from a humanist perspective Freire indicates that humans educate themselves through interactions with others. Supportive dialogues play an important role in helping each participant to develop a confident sense of self, this is foremost during a stage when individuals are questioning their beliefs and aiming to make changes to how they see things (Cranton, 2016). Conditions required for discourse include interpersonal skills, development of social relationships within group of participants, emotional intelligence Mezirow 2003 cited: (Cranton, 2016). Knowledge gained through CoPs is embedded in shared values of the participants, allowing it to be directly applicable to participants own practices, making it relevant and useful. We are invited to rethink our pedagogical practices. Critical reflections through a group 'enable us to overcome the distance between the world as it is and the world as we think about it' (Freire, 1974).

Reflecting on my own engagement in CoPs, I have through my work as a student and educator been afforded the opportunity to be involved in a variety of CoPs. In the last three years I have participated in the development of a CoP of Early Childhood Educational tutors. With the implementation of a new QQI Early Learning and Care program alongside my professional peers we met once a month online and face to face at the start and end of the

academic year. The aim was participation in shared understanding and concerns, what we are doing and what that means for our profession, lives and communities. (Lave and Wenger, 1991: p. 98).

Together we were able to analyse the new curriculum, dissect the framework, consider new approaches to teaching and learning, we met to discuss our individual and shared experiences, problem solve and create solutions to new and old challenges. From open discussion and dialogue, we were able to enhance our own teaching practices contributing to the collective knowledge to support all learners. From the exposure to different beliefs and perspectives, we were as Cranton (2016) points out, able to acknowledge oppressions of implementing a new curriculum and question our own and others' beliefs.

Through engagement with other participants, I learned how to distinguish between the skills of talking about our practices and talking within a practice. Both methods of communication allow for the engagement in a discussion, focusing on analysis, allowing for attention to be directed or shifted as required, supporting critical reflection (Lave and Wenger, 1991: p. 109). Jordon (1989) suggests that in order for participants to become an authentic member within a CoP involves not just learning how to communicate verbally with others, but also the requirement to know when to be silent and listen, this is a work in progress for myself. The retelling of our experiences through stories was an important aspect of situated learning. A learning curve of knowing what stories would develop critical analysis and when to tell them. The stories used for analysis and comparison play an important role in decision making. In agreement with Jordon (1989) when we are able to retell our experiences through stories it can be used as a tool for group interactions through interpretation analysis.

Factors that contribute to successful CoPs in education is developing 'team learning behaviour' the requirement to be able to ask the right questions and reflect and act on

feedback, discussing the unexpected outcomes (Edmondson, 1999) cited: (Makoto & Takami, 2017). Team reflection is often deemed an essential component of the organisation capabilities, the ability to identify and capture learning opportunities through critical reflection (Makoto & Takami, 2017). Newcomers within an established CoP will sit at the periphery of the group, members will move to full participation as they acquire the knowledge and skills within the group. It is important to facilitate a shared understanding and repertoire of practices. Knowledge will be developed through collaborative activities; this is refined through critical analysis and open communication. As the group develops and establishes trusting relationships, members will develop confidence in their individual and group identities. Roles will be established and negotiated. The participants develop a sense of purpose and belonging all of which is important for optimal learning. CoPs within educational environments have been shown to improve teaching practices and student outcomes (Vescio, Ross, Adams, 2008).

To become a full member of a CoP requires access to wide range of activities and resources, access to information, resources and the opportunity to participate (Lave and Wenger: 1991). The most successful CoPs are self-organised and not mandated by outside influences. Participants will decide on the interactions, rules and issues are determined by the members based on the shared values they bring to the group (Cotter, et al. 2017).

Mezirow (2003: p59) sets out some common requirements for authentic discourse to occur:

- The need to possess accurate information
- The group needs to be free from coercion
- Members must aim to maintain objective interpretation.
- Skills of critical reflection are required.
- All participants must have the opportunity to take part.

- Each individual member must be willing to accept informed perspectives that may differ from their own views.

Barbara Larrivee in an article on *Creating Caring Learning Communities* (2000) between teachers and learners describes some critical elements of creating caring communities which I believe can equally be applied to CoPs of educational practitioners. She has ascertained that the development of bonding relationships is fundamental. She uses the Acronym of RATE to describe the key elements. Respect, Authenticity, Thoughtfulness and Emotional Integrity.

Respect: Larrivee defines respect as acceptance, it is important to honour each individual's self-worth. To achieve these group members should listen respectfully to each other. It is important that each member has a voice and that members talk with each and not at each other, it is important to respond to each other. Key to respectful relationships is understanding different points of views. Members should be comfortable to discuss controversial issues and strive to find common understandings, there should be no fear of judgement.

Authenticity: group goals should be clear; roles should be established democratically and not assumed by members. Thoughtful communication should be encouraged, with members validating each other's feelings and experiences. All communication should be honest with mutual vulnerability demonstrated.

Thoughtfulness: is mutual consideration for each member. Consideration needs to be given to the emotional wellbeing of all members. Members should show tolerance and acceptance. There does not have to be an expectation for relationships to develop with every member, however members should work together towards mutual established goals.

Emotional Integrity: communicating with honesty, members need to be aware of what is happening and act on it, the group should be free to work through any emotions, always

keeping any feelings of resentment at bay. Members can be proactive, respectfully challenging opinions, issues should be acknowledged and considered.

Larrivee (2000) highlights the need for a safe space where participants feel secure to disclose and share their thoughts with purposeful meaning. The people in the groups are as important as the information learned. Creating such an environment allows participants to be real, wrong and vulnerable all at the same time, while engaging in open dialogue that is not manipulated by one person or agenda. Accepting each other's perspective and valuing what each person has to offer.

Members of CoPs will have different views this allows for analysis and different perspectives to be brought about, conflict will always be experienced caused often by participant's different viewpoints on practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991: p. 116). Achieving membership can be challenging, positive leadership and availability to resource allocations are critical. Cotter et al (2017) advise that while the aim of CoPs is to improve teaching and learning outcomes, the reality of working in an educational environment this can be an ideal and not always the case. From their research Cotter et. al. has demonstrated that educators often work in isolation of one another, there is often a culture in organisations of individualism, they go on to suggest that collaboration may not be the norm and be problematic to achieve and sustain (2017). It has been noted (Palmer, 2002) that the culture within the academic establishment can often be fragmented, and competitive with little sense of being part of a community.

The development and conversely the success of any CoP is reliant on each participant's willingness to engage in the process. Whalley et al. (2008) demonstrated that if members are forced into taking part, there will be a lack of commitment on their part and as a result a shared vision and purpose for the CoP is difficult to establish. Cotter et al (2017) stressed that

any involvement in CoP should stem from a desire on the part of the participants to communicate their passions and aspirations, alongside their confusions and frustrations.

Challenges can range from different and changing expectations of the purpose of the CoP. Finding the time and space to participate especially when we work in an area where student demographics and needs are constantly changing. This creates a pressure on educators to increase output. Institutions are placing greater pressures on educators for increased productivity and improved learning outcomes. McDonald and Steel (2018) would suggest that institutions are becoming more of a commercial entity, academic work is intensified with a decline in community, resulting in educators growing feelings of alienation from their practices.

The benefits of taking part in a CoP will surely outweigh any issue encountered. Mitchell & Wood cited in Cotter et al (2017) point out that some of the positive impacts that come from CoP include members over time developing greater abilities to manage change. Educators become more student focused, which in turn improves class outcomes (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). This concurred with findings from Berry et al (2005) who established that when teachers are involved in CoPs student learning improved.

Freire (1993) described how education could be used towards developing community empowerment. Incorporating CoP into the educational and professional institutions in which we work, will promote collaborative learning environments set within our social connections. In turn this will provide for more dynamic solutions to problems. Enhancing the participant's skills and professional and personal growth.

2.4 Professional Development

Professional development can be defined as an ongoing process through which professionals within a workplace acquire new skills, competencies and knowledge. This can be achieved

through wide-ranging activities and methods designed to improve performance and effectiveness with a professional role. Mahon et al. (2000) makes a distinction between personal development and learning; they make the point that these two terms are used interchangeably. Personal development can be seen as the resourcing and structures arrangement established to support the development of the teacher's knowledge and competence related to their teaching task (Mahon, et al. 2000). Within this we can consider personal learning as Mahon et al (2000) suggests a dynamic, organic and open-ended. It is a collaborative learning process that is informed by the context that are required specific to individual establishments.

The adult education sector in Ireland has gone through a time of substantial change and reorganization particularly with the amalgamation of Solas and ETBIs. Over the past two decades there has been significant change in the training and professionalism of adult educators. Fitzsimons (2017) describes the emergence of adult education as a profession from a bottom-up approach, she emphasizes this was in response to the needs of communities and industry in the 1980s and 1990s. As highlighted by Fitzsimons, early practitioners often originated from within the community, someone who was skilled in their own professional area able to pass on their knowledge and expertise, however she notes how many of these early adult educators lacked specific training in working with diverse adult learners' requirements. The publication of the Green Paper: Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning (Department of Education and Science, 1998) sought to examine how best to recognize adult education qualifications and made recommendations for promoting development through in service training and career progression options. There remains a need to continue developing a coherent further education and training sector supporting the growth and inclusion of adult learners through delivery of training and skills required by an evolving workforce. A lot is demanded of educators; they must have a broad understanding of what

and why they teach (OECD, 2019). There is a strong tradition among educators in engaging in professional development vital to the effective delivery of education and learning. As stated in the FET Professional Development Strategy, there is an established basis for creating support and strategies for integrated consistent approaches to continuous learning (SOLAS & ETBI, 2020). The Growth of Further Education and Training across the country demonstrates a commitment and passion to support adult learners in engaging in ongoing quality learning experiences. With the focus to build capacity of resources, building capability of learners and developing the confidence of practitioners (SOLAS & ETBI, 2020). Education and Training Boards employ close to 10,000 FET. practitioners (SOLAS & ETBI, 2020). The effectiveness and quality of the services offered rely on the staff quality at all levels. Professional development competency depends on the ability of the FET. sector to respond to the changing needs of employers and learners.

Professional development strategies at local and regional levels have been informed by best practices at a European policy level. The SOLAS & ETBI (2020) strategy ‘recognizes that learning practitioners are at the heart of quality education and training and that well-resourced strategies, spanning both initial education and career-long professional development, are necessary to recruit, retain and develop high-quality practitioners.’ At a national level the publication of the SOLAS Further Education and Training Professional Development Strategy (SOLAS & ETBI, 2020) sets out the importance of improved professional development opportunities ‘collectively renew and further embed a strong professional development culture across the ETB network by building on existing good practice throughout the sector and developing a professional development framework and structures to support ETBs in meeting the FET needs of learners, employers and communities’. This has filtered through too many ETBs devising their own local professional

development actions plans. While not my own ETB I found it very useful to refer for guidance to the Limerick and Clare 'Professional Development Action Plan' (2019 – 2021).

Salo et al. (2004) argues that due to lack of definition and the ambiguity of the concept of professional development, professional learning can often remain linear and transactional. Effective professional development stems from been multifaceted affected by interconnected practices. The (FET Strategy 2017-2019) concurs that while there is much evidence of professional development within the FET sector the strategy showed that much of this can be self-directed and reactive to day-to-day circumstances.

The Key components of professional development can include

- Workshops and Seminars: which are focused on specific areas led by experts.
- Conferences and Symposiums: groups of professionals gather to share knowledge of research and best practices.
- Online Learning and Webinars: offer flexible and remote learning opportunities to fit around busy schedules.
- Peer Mentoring: experienced colleagues guide and support less experienced or new educators in their field.
- Learning Communities: professional colleagues working together, sharing experiences and resources to solve problems and develop solutions.
- Reflective Practice: as a key method for self-assessment and evaluation on educator's own practices.

Salo et al. (2004) suggests education occurs in intersubjective spaces, engaging with one another, learning to grow and develop in mutual relationships. Professional development has been shown to be more effective when those engaging in it have agency over it. They highlight the importance of relationships in the process of professional development, creating

social spaces that provide opportunities for educators to relate to one another. The FET Professional Development Strategy highlighted the requirement for professional development to be aligned with peer support (SOLAS & ETBI, 2020). Best practices can be shared formally and informally, based within an organization a collaborative approach can be more effective than individual CPD. Research cited in Volmari (2009) encouraged study circles for educators where staff from different departments could meet to experience information exchange to support teacher professional development. They remark on the importance of collaborative networks of partnerships adding value to the knowledge shared and innovations in these networks. ‘Professionals and expertise are no longer understood as personal properties but closely tied to communities, organization’ (Volmari, 2009).

Professional development in education when used to stimulate critical thinking will enhance educational practitioner's skills of teaching and learning, from this personal growth is fostered through reflection. Ongoing and regular professional development will result in high quality educational outcomes not just for the educator and their students but will result in overarching institutional success. In agreement Guskey states that ‘notable improvements in professional skills almost never take place in the absence of professional development’ (Guskey, 2010).

In the rapidly changing sector of adult education professional development has become a crucial component of continuous development and learning. As educators it enables our skills and knowledge to stay relevant and up to date. We can stay attuned to the latest developments in the sector allowing opportunities to integrate new methodologies into our teaching strategies and promote opportunities for career advancement. Educators will be more confident in their teaching capabilities, improving job satisfaction (OECD, 2019). The benefit for learners is also wide reaching. Research has demonstrated that when educators take part

in professional development learners report higher academic achievements (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Educators become more student focused creating greater engagement with learners, providing them with relevant and meaningful class content. As stated, educators are more confident in their own abilities, this provides the aspiration for implementation of differential learning strategies in the classroom meeting individual learners need creating a student-centered approach. Taking part in continuous education allows the educator to become the student, this develops understanding and empathy with learners which can result in the development of emotional supportive relationships in the classroom. Institutions will reap significant benefits, promoting a culture of continuous improvement (SOLAS & ETBI, 2020) which enhances overall quality and reputation of the educational institution (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This ideology aligns with the FET Professional Development Strategy which places professional development competence of the workforce central to the ability of further education institutions to respond to the changing needs of employers and learners (SOLAS & ETBI, 2020). Consistent teaching practices across the institution are encouraged, improved teaching practices lead to higher student retentions and achievements positively reflecting on the institution. This can increase funding sources regionally and nationally, making the institution more competitive. Institutions with reputations for investing in and encouraging continuous professional development will attract and retain a talented workforce (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, OECD, 2019). To achieve this any professional development undertaken should align with the needs of the individuals and institutional goals and values.

Heavily reliant on these outcomes is the availability and opportunities for educators to take part in professional development that is relevant and meaningful to them. Many of the regional ETBs across the country have made significant commitments to promote professional development opportunities 'enabling staff to become reflective practitioners,

enhance their skills, and collaborate with colleagues. We recognize professional development can be facilitated in various ways, from accredited programs to workshops and professional learning networks (LOETB Service Plan, 2020).

If we look to the National Professional Development Framework for all staff who Teach in Higher Education (2016) it aims to provide a coherent structure where individuals professional practice can be mapped, this is absent to large extent in the FET strategy. This framework recommends educators reflect on their current knowledge, through self-evaluation, identifying and developing a strategy for professional development building on a capacity to shape and plan for future learning. This framework highlights the concepts of critical reflection and CoP as core to professional development initiatives. Through a range of professional development learning activities, the skills and competencies of educators teaching practices can be consolidated and new learning achieved. The Framework for Professional Development (2016) refers to activities that staff can engage in across four domains.

Domain 1: ‘Self’ self-awareness of own teaching values, perspectives and emotions.

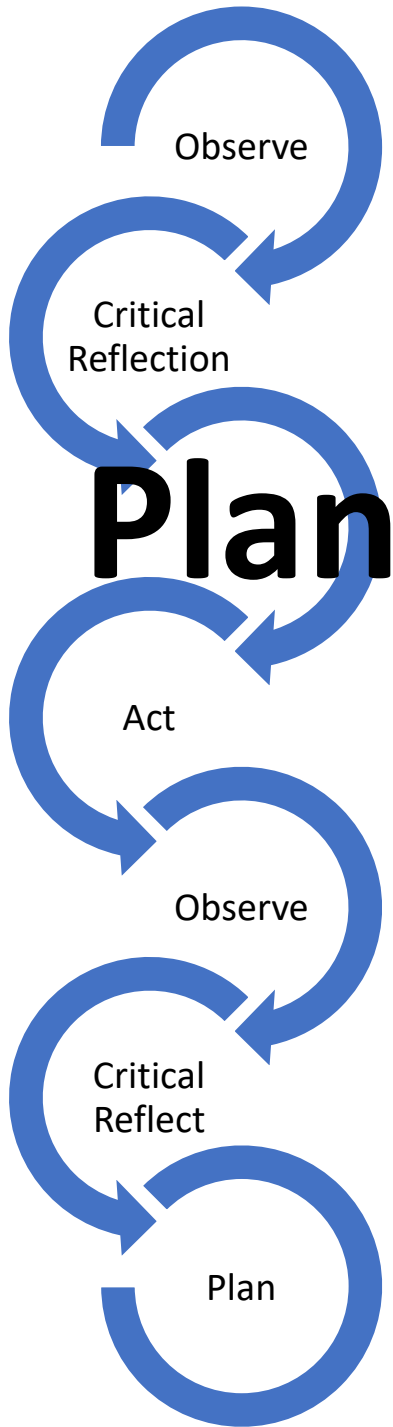
Domain 2: The importance of self-evaluation and professional identification of values and development in teacher and learning, supporting critical evaluation of teaching practices important in the planning for professional development.

Domain 3: Professional communication and dialogue. Development of clear and coherent communication skills. The importance of the social dimension of Professional development, the integration of communities of practice as part of this.

Domain 4: Development of professional knowledge and skills in teaching and learning.

Domain 5: Building personal and professional digital abilities to support student learning.

Professional development will form part of an individual educator's career; it will evolve as a professional's career develops. It will not be a linear undertaking but will shift focus and divert as the educator's role changes and progresses. Responsibility lies within the individual to undertake and engage in professional development; this must be supported through all stakeholder's commitments to support and resource professional development opportunities. This is underpinned in the Further Education and Training act 2013 which stresses the role of stakeholders is 'to provide or assist in the provision of training to persons charged with the delivery of further education and training programs.



**Cycle 3: Plan
Methodology**

Cycle 3 Plan

3.1 Methodology

From an epistemological stance my role in the research process is both as a researcher and participant. Not only was I responsible for developing the group of reflective practitioners, also the use of action research allowed for me to become a co-participant from the inside, having direct involvement allowed for a unique view of the critical reflective process, in agreement with Connolly (Needham, 2016: C.8. p. 146) this allowed for a less structured method of research to be used. Action research endorsed open communicative spaces between the researcher and the participants which encouraged analysis of the ‘the way things are’ were open to question and exploration. To understand the reality in which we work in order to transform it (Kemmis, 2005). The research became relevant and meaningful, co-participating opened the research methods to Schon’s reflection in action. Greater insight was gained enabling me to understand the context in which I work and teach. Research is multi-dimensional (Burton, Et.al, 2014), and I found that as the research was conducted it was ever evolving and took me in different directions. In agreement with Ya-Hao-Kate-Lin (Needham, 2016) being directly involved in the research as an active participant I was provided with more than just a snapshot, I was living in the ‘What-how-why’ (Needham, C.9, p. 157). The first-hand experiences provided clear descriptions and insights into the attitudes and perspectives of the other participants. In this sense the research itself became reflective (Needham, 2016: p. 3). Naturally occurring information was created using a constructionist approach, the evidence of the lived experience and nuances of creating communities of practitioners, the highs and lows, overcoming barriers and anticipating outcomes. Needham (2016) implies that being involved in the research allows the researcher the opportunity to make sense of the results of the research.

Adopting an ontological stance is recognising the social context that communities of practices can provide, as educators we can create supports for deep learning and professional development to occur. We are as both educator's and learners in this space in the pursuit of knowledge, understanding and professional growth. Opportunities to co-create knowledge, generate new ideas, refine our educational practices offer clarity to our beliefs and understanding. Action research is both a social and educational process (Kemmis & Mctaggart, 2005). We become aware of the individual and collective identities we have within the context of our educational establishment. Communities of practices are dynamic and evolving in their nature, they are responsive to the changing needs of the participants, challenging our preconceptions, creating overlooked and new insights, encouraging innovation that we integrate into our teaching practices to benefit the learners in the classroom. Likewise, the use of action research was fluid, open and responsive to the CoP. Using Kemmis and Mctaggarts (2005) spiral of action research observe, reflect, plan and act encouraged development of a holistic relationship between the practitioner and the learner, involving cognitive, social, cultural and ethical perspectives. The 'Object of research' was directed toward studying our practices, reframing our perspectives and reconstructing our ways of thinking and doing (Kemmis and Mctaggart, 2005).

Knowledge and learning are ever evolving, and we have two options, to stay within the safety of what we know and believe, or we can be motivated to embrace change. During collaborative reflective enquiry we are more open to new ways of thinking, we can make sense of the unknown. From this point of view, it was a natural progression to conduct qualitative research methods. As suggested by Needham (2016: c.47 p. 1) it is instinctive of educational professionals to learn from each other. Research can be an everyday activity without even been aware, it is embedded in conversations with colleagues and learners,

posing and answering questions we are co-creating our understanding of the social context of which we live and work. In conducting research, we are getting answers to the questions. The use of qualitative research naturally encourages critical thinking. Critical Participatory Research allowed for exploration of practice in a rich deep way. Bringing to light and encouraging communication about practices from a variety of perspectives. Exploring themes of contemporary interest in relation to the social complexities around us (Kemmis, 2005).

Through the use of my practice as an adult educator as a site of research to inquire on the process and impact of creating communities of reflective practitioners the aim is to develop collaborative reflective enquiry. The rapidly changing landscape of adult education requires us to challenge our understandings of how and why we teach locally, socially and politically. As educators research plays a fundamental role into providing insights to these challenges. Critical educational research aims to not just change the individual's practices but will also impact and inform the collective action of all research participants involved in the process (Kemmis, 2005). As part of the model of inquiry an interpretive paradigm was implemented, here research is viewed as a social process, interpretive paradigms emphasise research embedded in qualitative methods. From the action research the focus was to be a co learner as a researcher and participant. McNiff & Whitehead (2010) recognises action research as a practice for studying our practices and offering explanations for what we are doing. Action research can be a method through which we improve our practices through improving learning and knowledge. Action research has the ability to bring reflexivity and dialogical critiques together. It provides an insider perspective generating living theories of practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). My role as an interpretive researcher was to explore the variety of participant's perspectives. I wanted to investigate the shared meaning and understanding of the process of creating communities of reflective practitioners. I trusted that this would

provide me with deep insight into not only the personal and institutional impacts but also wider social and external effects to the research participants and their learners.

A key focus of the research was to support transformative learning opportunities as colleagues we could all benefit, seeking to make meaning of the learning within our educational setting, developing critical analysis of our experiences, challenging our preconceptions and providing insight to our practices. Choosing educational research such as reflective practice supports my own problem solving in this area. It allowed me to challenge my own assumptions ultimately with the aim to make a difference in my own work environment. Qualitative research provides an opportunity for such research to take place in a natural context, in my case this was the educational establishment in which I work, where the participants were more comfortable and trusting of each other. Mezirow's theory of Transformative learning highlights how through critical reflection we can make sense and meaning from our experiences, how social and other structures influence or experiences and modify our meaning and understanding. As part of critical reflection, we can transform our learning through challenging our assumptions and if found wanting we can consider how we can change. Mezirow suggests there is a mental and behavioural shift. From the community of practice meetings, I believed we could create an opportunity for a catalyst of change through 'Disorienting Dilemmas' to transform our views and practices. Essential in this is our communicative skills with each other resolving through rational analysis rather than force (Christy, Carey, Roberts & Granger, 2015).

The methods chosen for the research aimed to address my research question '*Empowering Adult Educators: Consideration of How We Can Create Sustainable Communities of Practice for Critical Reflection to Develop Transformative Teaching Practices*'

To consider this research question further, I wanted to firstly, contemplate what are the key components of communities of practices? Secondly, I wanted to examine how communities of practices can support educators in critical reflection. Thirdly, an important consideration was how critical reflection can be transformative to teaching practices. Following from my own experiences I was aware of the barriers to creating and sustaining critical reflection and wanted to evaluate these barriers more with the participants. I wanted to gain an insight into the participants' understanding of the role of communities of practice and critical reflection as part of their professional development. Finally, I wanted to assess what are the best practices for facilitating critical reflection within communities of practitioners.

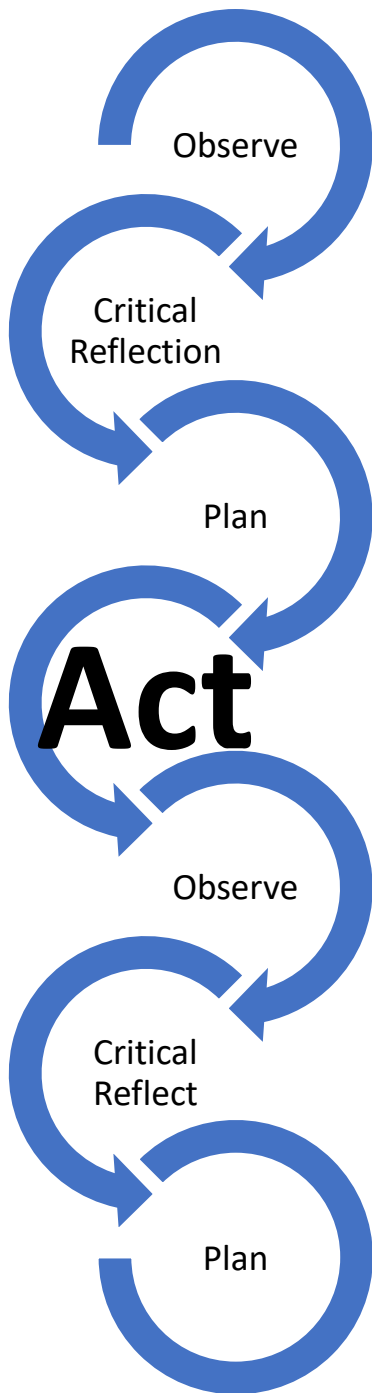
I have demonstrated the action research conducted as a cycle suggesting that there will be no end to research process. Moving beyond the action research the aim is for the CoP to become sustainable to achieve this I believe it will move into a space of participatory action research.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) highlight the main features of Participatory Action Research.

Participatory Action Research is:

- A social process: The collective work together to understand the how and why.
- Participatory: Engages participants in examining their knowledge and how our awareness shapes our sense of identity and understanding.
- Practical and Collaborative: Participants are involved in examining social practices that link with our social interactions.
- Emancipatory: We can uncover and release our understanding from the constraints of unproductive and unjust social structures.
- Critical: Participants deliberately set out to contest the ways of working and the ways of relating to others.

- Reflexive: we can investigate the reality in order to change. Transforming practices through a spiral of cycles of critical reflection.
- Transforming theory and practice: critical reasoning is encouraged through theory and practice and the consequences have the potential to illuminate.



Cycle 4: Act
Formation and
Development of CoP

Cycle 4: Act

4.1 Creating the Communities of Practice

(Burton, Et.al, 2014) describes action research as multi cycled process, the aim is to bring about change. Each critical reflective meeting that we took part in built on the next, the first meeting impacted our discussion of the next one and I am sure if given the opportunity for further meetings this would have continued. There is a shared aim in action research and in the communities of practice to impact change and inform and improve professional practice using a collaborative and inclusive approach. In developing the communities of practice, I used the theories of Hall and Simeral (2017) when developing and implementing a culture of reflective practice they have developed seven fundamentals required, importantly these are also required to build teacher capacity.

1.Relationships, Roles and Responsibilities.

As cited by Hall and Simeral (2017) ‘no significant learning occurs without a significant relationship’ (Comer,1995). The participants used as part of the communities of practice were all familiar to each other and had worked with each other, trusting relationships had already been established.

2.Expectations and Communication

A key question to ask ourselves is what to expect from a culture of reflective practice, what shape would it take in our work and learning environment. To promote this Hall and Simeral (2017) suggest we must have ‘open and transparent on-going communication’. In consenting to the participation in the research I informed the participants of the parameters of the research. The aim and the purpose were clearly communicated.

3.Celebration and Calibration

To maintain momentum according to Hall and Simeral (2017) it is of equal importance that we remain diligent and alert, reviewing our practices when we need to recalibrate. This was a key element when engaging in critical reflection with the participants.

4.Goal setting and following through

In creating communities of practice, I wanted to use reflective practice as a tool to grow within the organisation, allowing us as professionals to hone our own skills. Hall and Simeral (2017) recommend that we meet as educators to reflect on individual and collective goals.

5.Strategic Teacher leadership support

In the development of reflective engagement, we can work collaboratively, supporting each other as teachers, we can become interdependent creating opportunities where we can learn and grow our professional skills. In my research I was aiming to engage in formal opportunities to provide peer feedback and engage in professional growth.

6.Transformational Feedback

Hall and Simeral (2017) put the case for ‘talking teacher’ to continue with ongoing development we must provide impactful feedback, which will transform our thinking and so transform our practices. The aim for me was to move the conversations from just ‘talk’ to critical enquiry.

7.Differentiated Coaching

Ongoing coaching in reflective practice is required for continuous success, it was important to support the participants in the engagement of reflective practice.

4.2 CoP Meetings

With all of this in mind I met with participants in February, April and May. I had hoped to start in January but found that after the Christmas period it was difficult to get participants to agree on a suitable time and date. As the group number was small, I felt it better to wait until everyone was able to attend. It also proved difficult to get a follow up meeting in March as I had hoped, this was due in part to participant's work commitments from the organisation, participants were involved in Erasmus projects, learner supports and illness on both my own side and some of the participants. Eventually a second community of practice meeting was held after the Easter Break in late April. A final community meeting took place in early May where three participants and I were able to attend, two of the participants were not able to take part due to illness. The difficulties I encountered does serve to highlight some of the barriers in creating and maintaining communities of practice and this will be developed further in the analysis of the research findings.

The format of the communities of practice was an informal meeting with like-minded colleagues. Critical reflection as part of a community of practice was new to us all and as such it was important to set out the parameters of critical reflection and structure of the meetings. I will admit in my naivety I believed that in the creation of communities of practitioners, coming together as colleagues would naturally lead to the development of critical reflection. Brookfield & Preskill also made this assumption 'If the right people come together there would be joyful combustion of energetic brainstorming with everyone involved' (2016: p.4) and they highlight the importance of planning for spontaneity. To support this process, I used Brookfield's & Preskill *Discussion Book 50 Great Ways to Get People Talking*. The techniques outlined in the book are to support participation in meetings, workshops and the classroom to develop conversations in groups, keep people motivated and

increase energy levels. Over the meetings I used 'Chalk Talk' and 'The sticky note plaudit' activities.

4.3 Conversational interviews with colleagues

The decision to include a sample of conversational interviews to support the development of the communities' practices, I felt was important to provide a rich source of research information. Using a selection of participants who were unable to commit to taking part in group CoPs critical reflection was a good alternative, educators are articulate and good communicators who are used to interpersonal communication. Kvale (2007) cited in (Burton, Et.al, 2014: p.132) discuss how 'Knowledge is often generated between humans through conversations.'

Due to the circumstances discussed above I was only able to conduct three critical reflective meetings. I felt I was missing some important insight into the participants understanding of CRP and I wanted to delve more deeply into the barriers to engaging in critical reflection particularly with colleagues as part of a community of practice. As suggested by (Burton. Et.al, 2014) interviews can be a good alternative to ethnographic research. The linguistic interchange of an interview can provide a '.... unique view on what lies behind our actions' (Robson, 2006: p. 272) I decided that rich qualitative data over quantity could be achieved in this way.

The interview format was an informal face to face conversations with the participants. This allowed me to respond to the body language and the tone and pitch of the participants. The conversations took place within our educational setting, here I choose to go to the participant's main classrooms an environment we both felt comfortable in where I was able to set the person at ease. As the participants were colleagues with whom I had professional relationships with I used a more conversational style. This provided the participants

opportunity to address all questions, that could be followed up and allowed for expansion. I was led by the participants and found that some questions were covered within answers, there was no set order to the questions. I was able to probe further to explore issues that arose as they came up in the answers. The design of the questions was open ended and allowed for further discussion. When needed I used probes to allow for follow up and to explore responses, the use of prompting ensured simple direct data was gained where needed and this also set participant at ease when answering the questions.

Given that the original research design had not included interviews a small sample of three interviews were conducted. I had to take into account the time constraints for participant selection and consent, allowing time for design of interview questions. I conducted one interview sample to test the questions. The conversations were conducted over one week fitting around the participant's available time. The small sample allowed for easier transcription of the conversations and coding and analysis of results. To assist this, I decided to provide the participants with the interview questions as a guide in advance, they were aware of the questions, and this allowed for some thought and reflection to answers prior to the interview.

4.4 Selection of participants

Similar selection criteria were used for both the creation of the communities of practices and the conversational interviews. Careful consideration was given to the research question and the participants interest. As the aim was to create communities of reflective practitioners within the organisation in which I work, twenty participants from within my educational institution were emailed and invited to participate. The choice of participants was based on their experience in adult education this was important to have the knowledge and experience that could support critical reflection and lead to transformative learning. I widened the

selection not just to be limited to the health care areas in which I work which is often the case, but to extend to all the subject teachers within the centre. This allowed for more diversity across all subject areas which allowed for an enriched discussion from different perspectives.

From the twenty emails sent five prospective participants returned emails expressing their interest in participating. I responded to this interest with individual follow up emails, which included research information and participant consent form. Possible meeting dates and times for the community of practice meetings was also coordinated with participants.

For the conversations I returned to the original emails sent and looked at who had expressed interest but were unable to commit to three meetings. I sent follow-up emails seeking interest to take part in a once off conversation. Five emails were sent with a response of three participants. I followed up with acknowledgement and agreement to dates and times of the interviews with consent forms and draft interview questions.

The research for both the communities of practice and the interview questions were underpinned by Brookfield's four lenses of critical reflection and Mezirow's transformative learning. In developing communities of reflective practitioners, Brookfield advocates for the importance of engaging in critical reflection, my research will consider providing a space where we as educators are open to examining our teaching practices, allowing educators to develop the confidence to challenge our assumptions and consider their validity particularly those that are limiting and oppressive to our students. As proposed by Brookfield (2013) we need to reflect on our own practices and the impacts that our actions have on students. The use of Brookfield's theory of the four critical lenses as a method allows us to uncover and challenge our paradigmatic assumptions how we see how the world works, prescriptive assumptions how we believe we and others should behave or act and thirdly, our casual

assumptions the practices we engage in regularly without thought to their effectiveness. The key to success is to uncover our epistemological views, critically reflecting on our beliefs, knowledge, and opinions (Brookfield, 2017: p15). Using Brookfield's 'Lens of Colleagues Perspectives' was key in the community of practice meetings. A space was developed where we could intentionally reflect with a purpose. In this space the participants were able to develop insights into the unknown and unnoticed elements of their practices, learning alongside each other. Brookfield highlights the need for critical reflection to take part as a group collective (2005). I was aware that critical reflective practice does not always come easy and can cause anxieties, particularly when we are reflecting with our peers' colleagues we know well, those that we may consider more knowledgeable and colleagues who may bring their own bias with them. It can cause a reluctance to open ourselves to new perspectives.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

As the research was of qualitative nature ethical considerations were not an isolated consideration, as the participants are colleagues the relationships they have with me and each other were important to sustain throughout the process, according to Palaiologou (Needham, 2016: p38) ethics are interwoven during all stages of the research. There is a collective responsibility between the researcher and the participant. Here Palaiologou stresses that ethics should move beyond just gaining consent, embedded in the research involves a 'collective praxis approach' (1999: p. 38).

One of the most pressing considerations is how research participants will interpret their own critical reflections. Finlay (2008: p. 11) proposes that if the word 'Critical' were to be understood to mean 'Negative' this could result in a negative frame of mind. This could have repercussions, demotivating professional educators leading to disapproval and self-rejection.

To prevent any negatives in this situation a key role for me as the researcher was to ensure that during all community of practices meetings, I encouraged the participants to adopt an inclusive collaborative approach. The participants were the 'knowers' (Palaiologou, 2016: p. 47) their insight should be validated this allowed for active engagement they were not dependents of the research. The ethical parameters were underpinned by a mutual acknowledgement of the impact of our behaviours on other participants and the researcher, mutual respect and dignity for each other and the process, democratic values ensured at all stages.

Becoming aware and challenging our biases and assumptions is a fundamental part of the critically reflective process. This can be uncomfortable, as participants may not be aware of their own Bias, it was important that no micro aggressions were created as a result.

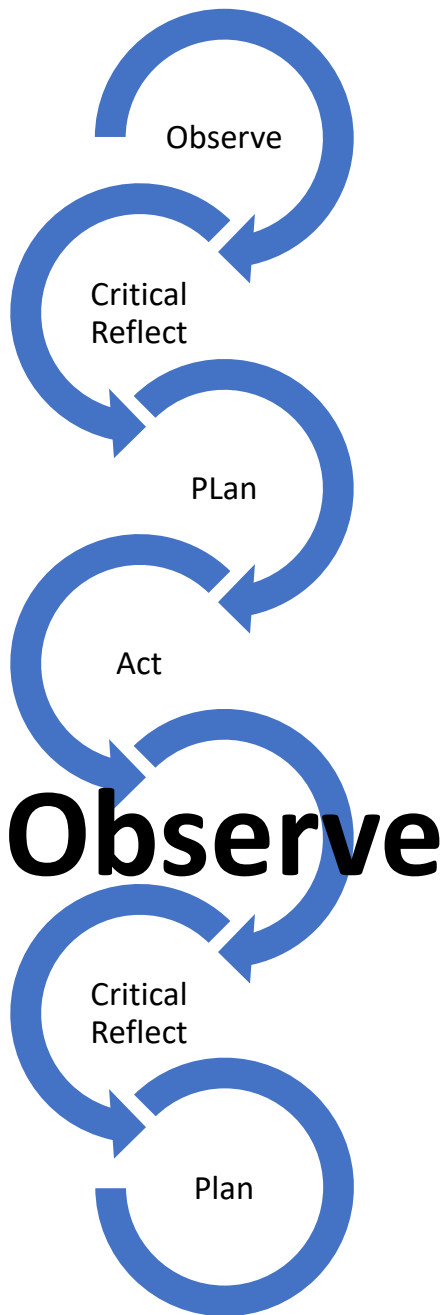
Acknowledgement that we won't always have the same views as others and quite often a question asked the wrong way, or a statement made to someone can antagonize a group member. As part of the ethical consideration, it was important to anticipate any power dynamics, to understand that participants may feel pressure to provide insight into their reflections in more positive ways or the way they feel other participants, or the researcher expect. More confident participants run the risk of taking over the group only seeking to provide their input and reluctance to actively listen to others within the group.

Informed consent was sought from the participants, overview of the research thesis was provided to them; they were informed of possible ethical considerations and guidelines for their participation in critical reflective practice. Each participant was asked to sign written consent forms to ensure they understand the parameters of the research and that their involvement was entirely voluntary, this continued to be negotiated at all stages of the process.

It was also important to make it clear to all participants that they had the right to refuse to participate or withdraw their involvement in the research at any time. Participants were reassured that all information provided by them would be treated as confidential in line with the GDPR regulations. During the analysis and research findings I ensured that participants were anonymised and could not within reasonable care be identified, participants were identified at random by number: Participant 1, Participant 2 etc. and the actual names of participants are only known by me the researcher. As the research was conducted within the researcher's place of work, I ensured that any details that might reveal identities were disguised. Participants were made aware during their consent that interviews conducted would be audio recorded and that extracts may be quoted as part of the analysis and findings.

As the research involved critical reflection of the participants own practices it was essential to the ethics of the research to maintain a respectful and non-judgemental process of critical reflection with each other. A key goal is to optimize group participation and engagement. Working within an environment of trust, where open discussions and analysis are encouraged, trusting the participants provides fresh eyes allowing the participants to bring their experiences to the community of practice meetings, a key goal when creating the community of reflective practitioners was to provide 'New solutions to old Problems' (Palaiologou, 2016: p. 47). To this end, during the first community of practice meeting I discussed with all participants a code of conduct for engaging in critical reflective practice. This involved participant's understanding their role within the research, ensuring full consent, maintain privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of the group.

In agreement with Freire (1982: p. 30 –31) cited by Palaiologou (Needham, 2016) 'research becomes a means of moving beyond the silence into a quest to proclaim the world' Qualitative research in this way can lead to social transformation, ethical research is achieved when the participants are listened to, when we empower their points of views.



Cycle 5: Observe
Reflecting on Research

Cycle 5. Observe

5.1 Reflections on Action Research

As I considered my thesis and research question, I was drawn from the beginning in early September to critical reflection as a means of professional development and creating spaces for critical reflection within my own workplace environment. I have often considered how we are always reflecting in those informal spaces around the workplace, the staff room, the hallway, the phone call to a colleague on the way home from work. I had that niggling doubt that this is what we do ‘talk’ about how we are feeling, what are the issues and what's is impacting us at local levels and often we would be prompted by world news and issues to discuss how that was impacting us and our work practices as educators. But the question kept resurfacing, is it just talk? Are any of us coming up with solutions? Are we implementing changes in the classroom because of this ‘talk’?

I cannot speak for any other educator; I am only able to reflect on my own experiences.

While I found these conversations with colleagues interesting and reaffirming that we all had similar experiences. I was self-aware enough to know that I would often give advice to others, but I did not regularly solve any of my problems or adjust my teaching strategies in a huge transformative way as a result. I asked my questions, why is that? am I reflecting; yes, am I considering my practices; yes. It was great to listen and communicate with other colleagues. It definitely eased the pressures often felt from the classroom, to within the local institution, to what's happening in our community, even global events. Once I walked back into my classroom the conversation was quickly forgotten, I had to facilitate my class, meet the learning outcomes, discuss assessments and corrections, there was clearly no room or space in my head to consider these reflections more deeply. Once spoken, there was relief, a sympathetic understanding with others, but the thoughts were quickly forgotten, and I moved

on. Reflecting now there was evidence of reflection with others, but for me anyway it did not move into that space of critical reflection.

This was the beginning of my journey from reflection to critical reflection. From that came the idea to put this to the test, could I create a space not just for me but for other colleagues too. Where we could meet outside of the usual space to talk, consciously make the time to meet to reflect on our practices, what would we do differently? How could we develop? Were we all facing the same institutional barriers? More importantly the critical part, how could we come up with solutions to solve or overcome our issues, did others have experiences of how we could make changes in our individual classrooms, could I listen, share and change to benefit myself and the learners in my classroom.

Now came the hard part, where was I going to find TIME to write a thesis, time to research, time to study, time to plan and prepare, time to teach, time to correct assessments. If I could not find the time, if that was already a barrier for me, how was I going to encourage other colleagues to meet with me as a community of practice to engage in critical reflection.

I let a few of my colleagues know, in those staff room chats, that I was working towards my MEd and would be doing some research. Fast forward to September, I was busy, busy acclimatizing learners to a new class environment. Not to worry I will send out invites to participate in October I have plenty of time, Halloween comes and go, November is quickly ticking by. I am starting to stress I need to start the CoP meetings before Christmas.

Finally, I get my act together twenty emails sent out and there were a few responses, five responses from colleagues I knew well who were trying to help me out. Questions resurfaced again. Did they feel that they could not let me down, anyone of us could be looking at some time in the future with help on research? I had helped out two out the five colleagues in previous years with their research, was there an obligation there to return the favor. Always at the back of my mind; are they really interested in engaging in critical reflection meetings as a

community of practice? Don't get me wrong, I was delighted and appreciated their interest and that is what we do as colleagues to support each other to achieve.

Now I have the invitations to participate sent out. Consent forms completed and waiting for them back. Into December the realization hits that we are all too busy now to get a CoP meeting in before Christmas, my fault I left it too late to organize, pressures of meeting module deadlines and first round of internal verification's loom in January. There are other staff meetings to attend and professional development to complete and Christmas gatherings in the center. There just is no free day available. Secretly, I am a little relieved; have I thought how these CoP will look? What will we discuss? I have not all my research on Stephen Brookfield completed. I feel unprepared.

Into January and the barriers (or excuses continue?). We will agree to meet in the middle of January, a date is set and a time. Covid hits and I and another participant have Covid and the CoP meeting is now postponed until February.

We did meet in February, that in itself is more difficult than I had anticipated, several emails back and forth to agree a day and time that suited all six of us.

It became evident, I may already be looking at my findings. I had not considered that the research was already underway, in my head the research only began at the first meeting of our CoP meeting. Firstly, time was an issue, a time and day that suits all. Secondly, our issues such as ill health, our other commitments to CPD will impact the development and momentum of any other CoP meetings, especially if like me you are reliant on a small group.

In the first meeting I was quite naive. I had considered how I would facilitate it. I thought I was prepared. I was nervous of moving into that role of facilitator with my colleagues, they were looking at me, 'what do we do?' 'What do you want us to discuss?' I thought the discussion and reflection and analysis would just happen naturally with a few prompts from

me. It became clear that the participants were unsure of what a CoP would look like or what it would entail. In this first meeting I used Brookfield's & Preskill 'Circle of Voices' (2016). This was a useful technique for a small group, it encouraged early participation and provided and opportunity for all participants to take part, the key to this technique is that all views can be heard, and it encourages actively listening in the group.

We talked about some of the issues we were experiencing in our classes, that was interrupted with silences and looks to me for assurance. While I am comfortable in my class within a leadership role as a teacher and facilitator, this was outside my comfort zone, the participants my colleagues were looking to me for leadership.

On analysis even though we were comfortable with each other and had a trusting relationship previously developed, I could observe that the participants were nervous of opening up in a formal space. While we shared experiences with each other of our practices, I felt that there was an absence of critical analysis, we were very polite to each other and unsure of how to critique and provide constructive criticism to each other. We know how to do this respectfully with our students, so the how? was not the issue. The difficulty was we were colleagues and did not want to offend anyone. Maybe I am too critical of myself here, because there were worthwhile discussions during that first hour. I had not considered however that we were essentially a new group, a new team forming for a common purpose, and we would still go through that team formation, that all groups experience when they meet for the first time.

Unfortunately, the issues of time came up again and the next meeting we could all agree on was in April. I was more aware now of the importance of creating opportunities for discussions and I looked to Brookfield for some suggestions. In the second meeting I had prepared the 'Chalk Talk' activity (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016) the idea was to create a graphic representation of discussion points. We would write our thoughts down to alleviate

the pressure to verbalize our ideas out loud while everyone looked at you intensely listening, making the speaker slightly self-conscious and the other participants are thinking what I am going to say next? I prepared our venue in advance; I had a large white board in the room and before the other participants arrived, I wrote the first question on the board, quite an open and broad statement, it was there just as an opening topic and was I happy if that evolved or changed. 'What direction do we see the evolving role of the adult educator moving towards'. I left all the same coloured markers on the table, this was intentional so in the end we could not differentiate who wrote what by colour.

Once all the participants arrived and had a coffee in hand, I explained the idea to the participants, they were invited to write their response to the questions on the board, they were encouraged to take their time, they were invited to stand back and view the board as the responses were written and they could add some of their own insights or reflections that came to mind. They were free to draw connecting lines to responses, linking comments where they identified links. They were free to pose other questions if they wished.

When the board was full, I observed a lull in posting. I invited all the participants to sit around the board. It was messy and full of hard to read handwriting and questions, but I felt that was a win, clearly there had been significant engagement. I suggested we take time to read any of the comments that we had not written ourselves, did we agree with the statements, had anyone a different viewpoint. The beginning of critical analysis was developing; participants were more at ease to give opposing opinions as we were not addressing anyone directly but addressing the board.

Following this success, I promoted any ideas or suggestions that participants had that would support development and learning going forward. I walked away very content that day, this was the beginning of what a CoP meeting could look like critically reflecting together. All participants agreed that it was a very useful activity and there was learning from the activity

as a stand-alone exercise in itself, that could benefit us all in promoting discussion with learners in our classrooms. That was transformative, all of us colleagues as learners taking part in an activity that we could bring to our individual classrooms as facilitators to benefit our students' learning outcomes.

Our next meeting took place in early May, the pressure in many ways was slowing for us as teachers (not necessarily for the students, they like me were furiously struggling to finish their remaining assessments). Most of the classes were finishing up and most corrections were completed. We could see the end of May insight. Bringing forward our new sense of confidence from the last meeting, three out of the five participants could attend. It was important to proceed as I was worried that another opportunity would not arise if I left it. I should say that at the end of our second meeting I had encouraged, if possible, learners to do some self-reflection in journals between the second and third meeting. There would be no pressure to this or expectation to share any of our thoughts with the other group members if you did not wish to.

Brookfield's ideas from his discussion book had proved very effective in the second meeting, I put my trust in him again and returned to book for some ideas. I found 'The Appreciative Pause–Sticky Note Plaudit' activity (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016). As this would be our last meeting, I wanted to end the research on developing CoP meetings and critical reflection on a positive note, quite literally. The aim of the activity was to encourage appreciation for each other in our different roles as educators. To finish with a sense of satisfaction from our contributions within the CoP, but also more broadly within our roles as educators. I hoped this activity would provide the opportunity to respectfully acknowledge each other as we came to the end of another academic year. To allow the opportunity to reflect on what we found most helpful and informative or even inspiring. I encouraged any discussion from the individual reflections kept in the participant's journal. I reinforced that there was no pressure

to share or disclose reflections from the journals and the discussions could be more broadly based on what we take away from this academic year. Reflections on what we felt we did well, goals or achievements we wanted to share with others. As there were only three participants and myself, I observed that there was a little bit of nervousness, the smaller group left us more exposed and vulnerable, it was surprising that even when missing only two participants this could happen, the group dynamics had changed again, if only very slightly. Once I explained the topic of the activity, I could sense the group becoming more relaxed again. We had created that safe place, that once expectations were known we were comfortable and confident to critically reflect. As the discussions began, I explained that every five to ten minutes we would pause for approximately one minute and the only comments allowed from the participants were those that acknowledged how something that someone else had just said in the discussion had contributed to their learning. Looking back because it was only the four of us, even the ten minutes' discussion before a pause was too short as the discussion only got going when we would pause for thought. The sticky note comes in at end, I invited all members to take five minutes to write on a sticky note a message of appreciation, or solutions or ideas to any of the discussions points that were reflected on, that would help us overcome, inspire or move forward towards next academic year. With the small group I did encourage as many sticky notes as each participant wanted to write. We finished with a coffee, and I placed all the sticky notes on the trusted whiteboard for us to read. This activity had marginal success and I believe this was ultimately down to the small group number but would be a valuable tool to use in any professional work area to promote acknowledgement and validation of professional roles especially where there is a large group interacting with each other. As teachers, especially women we may often feel less than. We can be afraid to highlight our own achievements or competencies for fear of appearing boastful. In one of our CoP discussions one participant mentioned often feeling like an 'imposter' in her words *'I am*

faking it until I make it'. It can be hard to see ourselves and our achievements from the views of others. This activity in the CoP offered the opportunity to boost morale after a long year where everyone was tired of teaching, facilitating and accommodating. We also had the critical reflective cycle of discussion and sharing, moving to analysis in the pauses and finishing with the sticky notes for development. At a time when energy was low, it reminded us why we do what we do. We walked away even if only for a short time feeling affirmed and recognized as valuable contributors.

We did meet again, during that week for a short twenty minutes, this was an opportunity to reflect on how the process of critical reflection and the formation of CoP worked as part of my research.

5.2 Feedback from Participants

There were clear positives from the participants on the engagement and relevance of engaging in critical reflection as part of community of practice. It was evident from the feedback from the group of participants who engaged in the CoP and the colleagues who took part in the individual conversations with myself, that they were all in agreement of the positives of sharing experiences to promote a collective wealth of wisdom.

Participant 1. *'We all have similar experiences and it's good to hear other teachers' experiences that they have had'*

Participant 2. *'We all have the same experiences that's what came up in the last meeting, all our similar experiences can help each other.'*

Engaging in dialogues with others exposes individuals to new ideas and thinking, this can spark creativity and can inspire us to try new approaches.

Participant 1. *'.....and I think we learned from other people's experiences and even sharing and coming up with ways to improve.'*

Participant 4. *'It was enlightening.if you don't spend the time to think, it will often pass away, and you'll miss that opportunity to modify your thoughts or your behavior the next time you run into that situation.'*

Participant 6. *'It gives multiple perspectives because there's so many learners that different people have different ideas. And I think that that input of multiple perspectives into the reflection is very, very helpful'.*

The value and importance of communication was clear and the building of trusting relationships among community members to enhance team dynamics.

Participant 1. *'It always helps to talk to others'*

Participant 4. *'The more we communicate the better..... And I think that kind of circular Communication is important to the reflective process. Communication is a good way of breaking down barriers'*

Participant 2. *'give us great opportunities to listen to input from all areas.'*

Participant 5. *'There's probably a couple of colleagues that I chat with regularly up and down if there is an issue we would like to discuss or get another opinion.'*

Sharing experiences as part of CoP can offer participants validation of what they are doing right. It reassures us that that we are not alone in our challenges and our success.

Sharing those experiences through critical reflections with each other fosters empathy and creates supportive environments.

Participant 1. *'I think it helps and if you have an idea you discuss with someone else, and they agree with it, it helps you going forward in that direction'.*

Participant 3. *'You provided that safe environment for us to share in. When you are personally reflecting that's where maybe you doubt yourself, but when you have that collective reflection together you get a better understanding of your personal reflections it reinforces everybody's often feeling the same way'.*

Participant 5. *'That you're not isolated, if you kind of have class problems, that you're not thinking that you don't know what to do'.*

Participant 6. *'allows me to create the space where people try something different.and it keeps me engaged in my own thoughts'.*

Learning from each other's practical experiences within a CoP provides insights that can be applied to improve our practices.

Participant 2. *'you can all learn from each other and what other teachers are doing and implementing in their classrooms. As they say every day is a school day.'*

Participant 1. *'..... someone comes up with an alternative to help or some sort of mechanism to support active learning or catch those learners are visual or kinaesthetic or auditory, it's just good to have many ideas from other teachers. You can come up with ways to try it differently going forward. Definitely sharing experiences helps.'*

Participant 1. *'It is important to look for new ways of teaching all the time.'*

Critical Reflection can provide the space for intentional thought, setting time aside for critical reflection ensures that we don't overlook important insights. We can consciously consider our actions from experiences and plan for future action.

Participant 2. *'(Critical Reflection) gives us great opportunities to listen to input from all areas..... I think if you put it in a formal setting, you can get all sorts of things thrown at you, if its more informal like how you think that went, you get more honest feedback.'*

Participant 4. *'...my thoughts influence the way that I work with the students. And how by being aware of the areas that can impact my students'*

'so my understanding of reflective practices is that I am supposed to be aware of the things that make my responses to stimuli or the student. How those responses are influenced by my own internal state and thinking.'

Participant 5. *'It is important to understand that critical reflection is not looking at what's right or wrong really but how you can move forward..... the keyword for me would be why? Why did that happen? Why did I make that choice? Why did the learners maybe not take to this particular method?'*

Participant 5. *'I suppose I am influenced more by my own values and my own perspectives on things'..... 'but like actually critical reflection, looking, at the why and the how. How could we have developed this and how could we make it better and part of what we learned from the previous year.'*

5.3 Issues Encountered

It was difficult to get a full sense of the issues surrounding critical reflection this may have been the influence of participants not wanting to be openly critical to the process or fear of showing a lack of engagement in the CoP.

Time was frequently cited as a significant barrier to critical reflection. The busy schedules and heavy workloads, along with the fast pace of the academic year can leave little time to come together to reflect.

Participant 2: *'Time. Yeah, time is the first thing that comes to mind.'*

Participant 5 *'...sometimes when you're in for the day, it's very hard to find time to think or reflect, do stuff for yourself.'*

Participant.5 *'Barriers for critical reflection probably would be time. Classrooms are quite busy environments and the academic year is quite short. So, it's a bit like mindfulness. You know you should do it, but it's probably one of the things that's always on the bottom of the list.'*

Participant 6. *'I find here and in further Ed, we don't always make time to meet with each other formally. We get caught up with deadlines and time and we with the best of intentions never find the time to reflect.'*

A lack of a dedicated space and structure for CoP meetings was an issue highlighted.

The absence of a dedicated structured time and space can make it difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue and reflection.

Participant 1 *'I think if we had more of a space to do it (reflect) together. So, if there was space to do that in it would be a great advantage.'*

Participant 3. *'I would like it to be structured in some way, so it wasn't always done in the staff room over a cup of coffee. If there was time set aside for critical reflection as a group. If it was more focused.'*

Participant5. *'We don't get the space to do it. But I do reflect a lot individually, yeah, because you're always looking at what works, what could be better. Creating a space to do it would be good. It would be nice to have a chance.'*

Feelings of impostership syndrome and fears of judgement were identified as impeding open and honest space for critical reflection. This can often stem from a lack of confidence and a fear of exposing our weaknesses.

Participant 2. *'If it is formal they are often thinking who is reading this.'*

Participant 4. *'I feel in regard to teaching, I kind of feel like we have enough on our plate in the classroom. I don't mean in a bad way. It takes so much energy, right?'*

Participant 4. *'You don't always feel confident to express yourself for fear of judgement. What it is that really impedes you doing that (reflecting) is the personality that still exists underneath?'*

Participant 4. *'I was afraid of going into that zone (of reflecting thinking). And I'm still kind of afraid of going into that zone sometimes because you have to look really look at your downfalls and that can be hard.'*

Participant.5 *'So sometimes it's often that it can be difficult dealing with people who don't have a knowledge of your subject or don't have an understanding of the class and what their expected expectations are.'*

External factors such as prescriptive module descriptors and organisational policies, along with increased clerical work were noted. This can all lead to limiting the effectiveness of critical reflection.

Participant 1: *'.... you are constricted a bit, you have all these great ideas but some of the module descriptors are very prescriptive, and you want to change and update outdated module descriptors but that involves changing learning outcomes and having to go to QQI for that. It takes a lot of time.'*

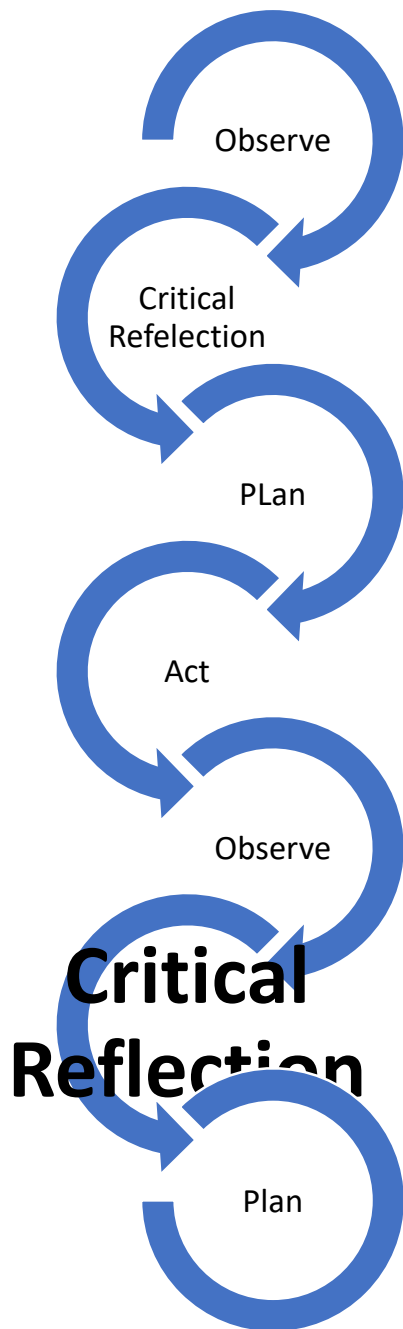
Participant 3: *'You can critically reflect all you want, but to go forward sometimes there are things that you just can't change, due to policies within your center or outside from QQI for example.'*

Participant 5. *'external factors from a staff point of view you have the general organization and external factors that can influence like numbers of students in the class that you don't often have control over.'*

Participant.5 *'There is so much clerical work and academic work with students that they will come first every time over critical reflection.'*

A lack of supportive leadership and professional development was mentioned by a participant. CPD plays an important role in fostering a culture of critical reflection. The absence of this can cause staff to feel unsupported in the critical reflective practices,

Participant.6 *'Leadership management is important, having relevant CPD availability and sense of community amongst the staff, I think they are all factors that impact hugely on our teaching perspectives and your ability to critically reflect.'*



Cycle 6: Critical Reflection
Conclusion

Cycle 6. Critical Reflection

6.1 Concluding Discussion

Critical reflective practice is a cornerstone for professional and personal growth. This is particularly true in education. When educators engage in critical reflective practices it seeks to enhance the learning of all, leading to improved teaching practices and will foster continuous improvement assisting educators to meet and address the complex challenges faced by adult educators in the evolving adult education sector in Ireland.

While it is clear that there are much reflective practices occurring in our educational establishments, informally through the adhoc conversations with colleagues or more intentional reflections from individual journaling or the meeting of colleagues during CoP. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of these reflections and if they move to a deeper insightful critical enquiry that can lead to a transformative practice. There is a surface level understanding of the importance of reflecting on our practices, however we must consider that it is often undertaken without a full consideration of the true meaning of what it is to critically reflect. Hatton and Smith concur that definitions of reflection, especially critical reflection are often 'inappropriate or inadequate' (1995: p. 38). There is clear need to develop our interpretations underpinning critical reflection. We should move from merely acknowledging past experiences and actions, it is not enough to understand them we must work towards understanding, overcoming the issues and strive to act and change the way we do things as a result. When we do this we enter into the process of critical reflection we become aware of the ideologies that constrain our thoughts (Brookfield, 2005). We are open to challenging our assumptions and deconstructing them, this supports the educator in relating concepts of our knowledge and understanding. In doing this we become independent thinkers,

Brookfield (2005) asserts that this enables us to make good moral decisions that not only impact our actions in the classroom but can affect the wider social ideologies.

If we fail to move into the sphere of critical reflection, we can diminish the transformative potential for the social and political contexts that surround us. Mezirow (1991) describes how transformative learning occurs when we critically examine our assumptions, this leads to profound changes in our world view and practices. As educators we are often working in isolation in our educational establishments, close professional alliances with other colleagues are often forged. We become comfortable, we are safe in what we do but only within this immediate environment. The issue is we know our colleagues well, we are likely to be aware of their ideologies and educational philosophies, but there can be a reluctance as a result to 'not rock the boat' particularly when it does not impact us outside our immediate working environment, we are in fear of giving constructive analysis to our peers. In our best efforts to support each other we are missing the opportunities for critical engagements with others. There often becomes a long established culture of think and do and if the systems work why is there a need for change? Critical enquire can foster a greater awareness and sensitivity to the issues of equality and inclusion through critical reflection. We have the potential to analyse the biases that exist around us, we can challenge the norms and practices that contribute to injustices (Brookfield, 2005). For educators this can be empowering, we can be confident to advocate for social justice through recognising and addressing systematic inequalities in our own establishments and wider society (Freire, 1970).

From my own experiences developing a CoP as part of my action research I established that creating spaces where we invite discourse with others is a valuable activity. The ability to have a space where we can share our experiences acts as the stimulant to develop critical questioning (Cranton, 2016) and Freire (1974) would agree that dialogues in education can create a freedom to educate ourselves through our interactions with others. The development

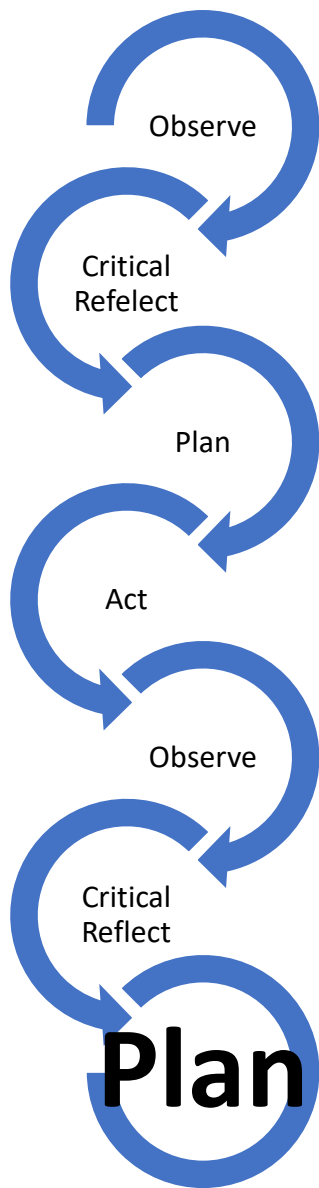
of community of practices can open participants to engage in critical enquiry. Brookfield (2017) and Wenger (1998) would agree that critical reflection is most effective when it is a shared collective endeavour. Mezirow (1997) highlights that through engagement in critical reflection with others we have the opportunity to shift our frame of reference and true transformative learning can transpire as a result. Dewey (1933) also emphasized that reflection should not occur in isolation and can be sparked from dialogue with others.

One of the most pressing issues that came from the findings was time needed. As educators we can become overwhelmed with existing workloads, this can make it difficult to commit to additional collaborative efforts. Darling-Hammond, et al. (2017) point to the cultural of individualism and isolation that we can often feel as educators. Taking part in collaborative critical reflections as part of a CoP can be problematic and difficult to sustain. For CoPs to be sustainable there must be a willingness from educators to engage. Consideration must be given to the mandating of any CoP by educational establishments and the negatives that could prevail as a result. Participants can pull back from such assigned activities creating a lack of commitment on their part (Whalley et al. 2008). Theorists such as Brookfield emphasize the importance of critical reflection as part of groups, but acknowledge the complexities around the mandating of these activities. Brookfield (1995) warns that this can result in superficial compliance and will lack authentic engagement. There can be an absence of the deep introspection required. When we are mandated to take part as educators we can lose our autonomy (Brookfield, 2017) this only seeks to reinforce a top down hierarchy. In establishing spaces where we feel comfortable expressing our thoughts, support must come from within our own educational establishments. Creating a culture where critical reflection as part of a CoP is valued and encourage is essential. It must be embedded into the natural fabric of the work environment and our role as educators leading to profound growth that support the educator's development and their students as a result.

Professional development provides a meaningful and useful way to enhance the capacity for critical reflection, providing educators with new skills and perspectives. Introducing new insights and methods allows for a deeper critically reflective analysis.

Professional development can be achieved through a wide range of upskilling undertakings. These can be designed to improve performance and effectiveness to develop our professional role. There is evidence of the strong tradition of professional development among adult educators in Ireland as noted by Fitzsimons (2017) she describes the emergence of adult education as a profession from a bottom-up approach, there was need for adult educators to develop their skills of teaching as they went along. To be successful professional development opportunities must be relevant and meaningful for those taking part and not just engaging in them to meet requirements set out by institutions. Professional development relies on the ability of the FET sector to respond to the changing needs of educators and their learners (Solas & ETBI, 2020). In most diploma and degree courses designed for adult educator's critical reflection is embedded into the structure of such courses, newly qualified adult educators are equipped to keep up to date with current educational trends and innovations. They have developed the qualities and skills to be able to critical reflect on their practices and have developed the confidence to continue to do this in their workplace. I would highlight the gap of critical reflection theories and skills in professional development courses aimed at more experienced long standing educators. By embedding reflective practices into professional development frameworks and programs we can ensure that adult educators are equipped to meet the needs of their learners through fostering critical reflection to enhance teaching strategies and continuous improvement. There can be inconsistencies in how critical reflective practices are implemented across different adult education institutions and this largely depends on local policies in the individual establishments. Without cohesive strategies across the broader adult education establishments critical reflection may fail to be

endorsed in any meaningful way through professional development. The Further Education and Training strategy (2020-2024) in Ireland emphasizes the role of critical reflection in professional development nevertheless more could be done going forward through the implementation of specific strategy's encouraging critical reflection through communities of practice. There are clear gaps in policies and strategies and guidelines on how we can embed critical reflection in to our roles as adult educators.



Cycle 7: Plan
Recommendations

Cycle 7. Planning

7.1 Recommendations

Emerging from the reflective inquiry I have developed ten guiding principles that can be implemented to guide the development of a coherent and meaningful professional development frame work for critical reflective practitioners as part of CoPs in the further education sector.

1. Developing an understanding of critical reflection with educators is the first step in promoting a culture of critical reflection for adult educators. This involves strategic steps ensuring the understanding of the theoretical aspects of critical reflection and integrating these in to every day work practices. Structuring professional development programs that focus on the principles and methods of critical reflection, involving practical exercises, case studies and real world applications.
2. Continue to embed critical reflection into all new adult education courses, this will assist new educators to become aware and proficient in critical reflection as part of their training and continuing this into their work as new educational teachers.
3. Using structured and recognised models such as Schon's reflective cycle of in action reflection and promoting the use of Brookfield's four lenses of critical reflection as fundamental tools to enhance all adult educator's skills of critical reflection providing a scaffolding framework of engagement in critical reflection.
4. Promoting an inquiry based approach to reflective practices. Practitioners should be facilitated to ask questions, investigate practices, seek new knowledge and be facilitated to undertake research projects as part of their roles as adult eduactors.
5. Providing the spaces to engage in such critical reflection is central to promoting a culture of critical reflection. Integrating Barbara Larrivee principles of R.A.T.E:

Respect, Authenticity, Thoughtfulness and Emotional Integrity to foster a safe and inclusive environment.

6. Provide the opportunity for educators to engage in discourse, sharing experiences and developing confidence to act on new insights promoted through regular staff meetings, online discussion boards, journaling.
7. Fostering a culture of constructive feedback where educators can feel comfortable and confident to critique each other's reflections, promoting deeper insights, this could be achieved through cross establishments support and incentives.
8. The allocating of dedicated time for critical reflection into schedules, establishing regular CoP meetings where critical reflection is prioritized. It should be ensured that these meetings are protected from other scheduling commitments.
9. Advocating for more flexible policies allowing for innovative teaching practices to be implemented will encourage transformative practices to be initiated by educators. It is important to reduce the unnecessary bureaucratic burdens on educators streamlining processes and reducing administrative workloads freeing up time for critical reflection.
10. Monitor and evaluate the progress of CoPs, set up systems of regular feedback within CoPs through peer reviews, self-assessments, group feedback sessions and using the information to inform future activities and discussions.

These principles do not mark the end of this praxis enquiry, rather it continues to highlight the cyclical nature of critical reflection by implementing these strategies, educational institutions can significantly enhance educators' understanding and practice of critical reflection, leading to improved teaching outcomes and professional growth and will continue to inform the next stage of the planning cycle.

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Appendix 1. Email to Participants

Subject: MEd Community and Adult Education Research

Hi all, as most of you are aware I am completing my Masters Research Thesis this year in Maynooth University.

The aim of the research is concerned with creating communities of practice for professional educators to promote engagement in critical reflection as part of continuous professional development, and to develop our teaching practices to promote transformative learning experiences for students.

As part fulfilment of the thesis, I am hoping to conduct some action research. I am looking for a minimum of five of my lovely colleagues as volunteer participants.

The study will involve three critical reflective meetings with a small group of participants during February, March, and April 2024. Each meeting will be one hour in length outside of normal class time. I will aim to have the meetings on a day that suits the majority of participants (possible a Tuesday / Wednesday 3.30 - 4.30).

I have also confirmed with Irene that these meetings can be used as part fulfilment of your Croagh park hrs.

If you think you might have the time or be interested in participating, I would greatly appreciate you emailing me back and I can forward you on full details and an ethical consent form through my Maynooth email.

I hope everyone has a lovely midterm break.

Kind Regards,
Claire Duffy, LOETB

Appendix 2. Participant consent form



INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Information Sheet

Purpose of the Study.

My name is Claire Duffy, a master's student, of the Department of Adult and Community Education, at Maynooth University, as part of the MEd Adult and Community Education program.

As part of the requirements for the MEd in Adult and Community Education, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr. Jerry O'Neill and Dr. Derek Barter.

The study is concerned with creating communities of practice for professional educators to promote engagement in critical reflection as part of continuous professional development, and to develop our teaching practices to promote transformative learning experiences for students.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve three critical reflective meetings with a small group of participants during February, March, and April 2024. Each meeting will be one hour in length outside of normal class time. Participants will be encouraged to engage in continued individual critical reflective practice informally during this time from February to April. This can be a method of the participants choosing such as a written or audio diary.

Following this the participants will be asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the critical reflective meetings in supporting their own professional development and impacts on their student's learning.

I will also conduct a small number of interviews with colleagues on their engagement in critical reflective practice as part of their professional development, to capture the rich information all interviews will be audio recorded.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked to take part as a suitable participant, as you are currently employed as a member of the teaching staff within the Laois Offaly Educational Training Board, more specifically the Adult

Education Department in Tullamore ETB.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, I hope that you will agree to take part and give me some of your valuable time to participate in the community of practices meetings. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records.

If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the research findings are analysed in May 2024. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships with myself as your colleague or the Department of Adult and Community Education Maynooth University.

What information will be collected?

There will be no requirement to have access to participant's individual reflections, or group critical reflections and analysis. The importance of my research is to engage participants in the critical reflective practice processes and provide the scope to develop communities of practice around this.

Through an evaluation at the end of the three meetings, information will be collected on the effectiveness of the critical reflective meetings to participants and their practice. Information on the participant's interest in continuing and sustaining a coming together as a community of educational professionals to engage in critical reflectiveness. Extracts from evaluations and subsequent interviews may be quoted as part of the research analysis and conclusions. Individual interviews will be recorded with consent.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. All participant's details will be anonymised, by changing names and disguising any details which may reveal identity.

All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU servers and will be accessed only by *Michael Murray or Angela McGinn (programme coordinators), Jerry O'Neill and Derek Barter (supervisors)*.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give?

All the information you provide will be kept on the researcher's PC, securely password-protected by a two-step authentication on Office 365. In the event of any names used, they will be anonymised in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up and presented as a thesis. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I do not envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. However, it should be recognised that engaging in critical reflection can be challenging, we are taking ourselves outside of our comfort zones, sharing our different perspectives of our teaching ideologies and how they might be interpreted by colleagues.

What if there is a problem?

At the end of the three critical reflective meetings, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. You may contact my supervisor Dr. Jerry O'Neill jerry.oneill@mu.ie if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, you can contact me: Claire Duffy Claire.Duffy.2024@mumail.ie (086 0534963)

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Consent Form

I..... agree to participate in Claire Duffy's research study titled
'Empowering Adult Educators: Consideration of How We Can Create Sustainable Communities of Practice for Critical Reflection to Develop Transformative Teaching Practices'

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my participation in the three Critical Reflective meetings and evaluation

I give my permission for participation in an interview with the researcher

I understand the interview will be audio recorded

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data up to May 10th 2024

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request.

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet

I understand that my data, is to be used in an anonymous format

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my evaluation

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my evaluation

Signed.....

Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitalsCLAIRE DUFFY

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact Michael Murray (michael.j.murray@mu.ie) or Angela McGinn (angela.mcginn@mu.ie) Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for the Researcher

Appendix 3. Interview Questions Prompts

Interview Prompts: *Empowering Adult Educators: Consideration of How We Can Create Sustainable Communities of Practice for Critical Reflection to Develop Transformative Teaching Practices*

Reflection is part of our everyday lives both personally and professionally. For me reflection can be seen as an opportunity that allows me to contemplate on my experiences. Reflection involves us retelling our experiences, considering our actions and how we feel about them. I can gain valuable insights and make connections. Critical reflection is more implicit, engaging in critical reflection we are intentionally reflecting with a purpose, and because of this we have a potential to change our practices. Important to critical reflection is been self-aware and understanding our own social and contextual perspectives and that of others, appreciating the complexities of issues and the solutions to problems.

1. What is your understanding of reflection and critical reflection?
2. What does critical reflection look like in your practice?
3. Do you use reflection or critical to support your students learning?
4. Does critical reflection form an important part of your own practice?
5. How and when would you engage in reflective practice outside the class?
6. Would you engage in reflective practice with colleagues, if so how and in what kind of situations?
7. Would you use reading or other sources to deepen your thinking or understanding of their practice?
8. Could you provide an example of a situation where critical reflection helped you to gain deeper understanding and insights?
9. Do external influences affect your teaching perspectives beyond classroom or centre?
10. How do you involve learners in gaining insights into your teaching practices or effectiveness?
.....Informally as classroom discussions, journaling. Formally student evaluations, course evaluations?
11. Would you like more space for reflection? opportunities for individual reflection, with colleagues as communities of practice, blogging, online forums.
12. What would stand in your way, are there barriers for you to engaging in reflective practice?
13. Reflecting on your own experiences. What advice would you offer others who would like to become more critically reflective?