

The Examined Life: The Kernel of Lifelong Learning?

Previously published in the *Maynooth Philosophy Supplement 2025* Philosophy and Education. Aleksii Ivanov Gramatikov (ed.).

Interview with Dr Derek Barter by Dr David O'Brien

As part of my reflection on the role of philosophy in education, I recently spoke with Dr Derek Barter about his views on the matter. This year and last year, I undertook some teaching work for Derek with the ComMUniversity and MU Department of Adult and Community Education. The experience was an enlightening one—it was not only both personally rewarding and intellectually stimulating, but also hugely enjoyable. The experience revealed to me an approach to education and learning that seemed very much to align with my own values and views on the matter, and—perhaps more pertinently—convinced me of the very pressing need for philosophy and critical thinking as an essential part of the Irish education system.

D.OB.: Hi Derek, thank you for taking the time to talk to us and answer a few of our questions for this issue of *Maynooth Philosophy Supplement*—‘Philosophy and Education’. We are interested in getting some of your insights into the relationship between philosophy, critical thinking, and education in a general sense, and then perhaps also more specifically in relation to the mature student.

D.B.: Thanks for the invitation and delighted to be asked.

1

D.OB.: First off, do you have a background in philosophy yourself? Do you think that the Irish education system is lacking when it comes to philosophy and critical thinking?

D.B.: I have always been interested in philosophy, but I do not have any systematic training in discipline. I took some modules in ancient Greek philosophy as part of my first-year undergraduate studies in the Classics and really enjoyed hearing about the pre-Socratics like Anaximander, Anaximenes and Heraclitus. Heraclitus’s idea that you cannot put your foot in the same river twice was something that stuck with me as a great insight in developing a theory of constant change. This is something that I still speak about today

The Examined Life: The Kernel of Lifelong Learning?

in the ComMUniversity or Return to Learning classes that I deliver. I use it to tie into Hegel's Dialectic. This concept of process and possibility is a cornerstone of my own philosophy of education. Then when you come to Socrates himself, I think we are talking about the first critical Adult Educator, constantly probing, reflecting, not being satisfied with the lazy stock accepted norm. For me I believe that the examined life is the kernel of lifelong learning.

To answer your second question as far as the Irish education system is concerned, I think of something that is opposed to change, so in that sense it might be said to be 'lacking'. Learning is transformational. The education system at least in primary and secondary phases is not a learning system but rather a set of learning structures and tasks, immobile and inflexible. I do not want this to come across too harshly as I think that teachers have a very important and challenging job. My thinking is that maybe it is imagined that it has to be this way to service the economy by imparting a baseline of practical knowledge in formative years. Also, education as a service sector in itself needs stability for its employees and to attract future employees at a time when we know that there is a shortage of teachers anyway. However, I think these are symptoms of a system that shows a lack of critical thinking around policy. For instance, I have often asked students who want to become teachers why that particular profession only to be dismayed by the answer 'the holidays'. These are normally traditional undergraduate students who have never left school so have limited life references. Policy-wise I would introduce a moratorium on school leavers going directly into teacher training for say two years so they can go and explore other options (is this sounding a bit like the Allegory of the Cave?). I would also expand the programme that has been under trial by the Dept. of Education in projects like the Maynooth University Turn To Teaching programme where more mature students are given the opportunity to enter teacher training. This would address one material issue that younger people find difficult to overcome that of accommodation, as most mature students have this aspect of their life sorted. Also, the valuable knowledge that life experience brings into the equation should not be overlooked. So, to get back to your point, as a place where critical thinking could take place, the educational school system, primary and secondary, as it is now configured, is not going to be fertile ground.

The Examined Life: The Kernel of Lifelong Learning?

Besides that, I have a preference in early years for Forest Schools and active learning, and I think that the early stages of a child's development should be centred around the body and play. As a sedentary lifestyle is becoming more common and reported declining adolescent mental health is a worrying trend then developing relationships with the natural world would I believe offer another way to look at education as a pedagogy of care that can promote wellbeing beyond the clinic. Speaking of Forest schools, I have the harebrained idea that Coillte¹ should donate a plot of land each year to every primary school across the country and each new junior infant be given a seedling of a native Irish tree to plant and care for. A visit to the planted seedling once per month for the entirety of the child's time in formal education would allow the kids to connect and feel invested in another living thing. Alienation is real and this small gesture could at least do no harm; in a way it would be really putting down roots but also about thinking about the future. I think that would be lovely.

To be honest I would not have anyone sitting behind a desk with pencil in hand before the age of nine or ten. I do not see any reason why Critical Thinking skills cannot develop in tandem with physical growth, being out in nature at least some of the time. Essentially, I believe that critical thinking is about developing a faculty for discernment and this is based on understanding relationships and categories you do not need to be in a classroom to be exposed to either. Using a child's natural curiosity and inquisitiveness about the world would place learning in the positive experiences column rather than the minus painful restrictive experiences where it resides for a lot of people.

3

If we could imagine a more flexible approach to second level education in particular and take it out of the points driven Leaving Cert. (LC) funnel I think there's an excellent opportunity to turn Transition Year (TY) into Transition Years. Say between the ages of 16 to 22 we could allow people to sample lots of different ways of learning both in the classroom, in the community, in the workplace and all of these experiences could have some element of reflective critical thinking embedded in them that would give kids the opportunity to make wise choices about the actual course of study they wish to undertake rather than be stuck on a course of study based on a choice of subjects they had to sign up for when they finished their junior cert. This might in some way address

The Examined Life: The Kernel of Lifelong Learning?

the increasing dropout and absentee rates that universities are concerned about. This blend of academic and experiential learning could have credits attached and build towards a third level award by passing the LC and here you could include philosophy. We did pilot a version of the CommuniVERSITY for TY students a number of years ago in a school in Dublin and this included modules in Philosophy, Anthropology and Psychology. We mixed kids from different classes together and they seemed to enjoy this way of doing things. What was surprising and exciting was the fact that some of the students that the teachers thought would struggle were the most adaptable and engaged. We did run into timetabling problems but with a bit of forward planning this could be overcome. This is definitely something I would like to try again.

D.OB.: What is the role of education? Is it or should it be about *employable* skills?

D.B.: I think that the role of education performs many functions throughout a person's life. When most people think of education the first thing that springs to mind is school and university. The assumption that a person's education is over by say the age of 23 and then off you go into the workforce where you might be required to undertake workplace training, or Continuing Professional Development as part of your career path concentrates on the instrumental aspect of education. After all how many times have you heard that having a degree increases a person's earning potential by multiples in comparison with someone without a university education. This commodification of education turns places of learning into a business and as such businesses have to turn a profit. Then I am inclined to ask myself, 'What is the business of the university then?' In some sense it is to impart skills, but there must also be room for creativity and the search for meaning.

As someone who works in Lifelong Learning I might have a different understanding of education to many university lecturers. When I think of a student my mental image is someone anywhere between say 30 and 80 years of age and I could meet them in all kinds of settings, libraries, community centres, parish halls, drug rehabilitation centres, you name it. So, the role of education in their life will be determined by their wants and needs. Take the ComMUniversity for instance. The function of education within the

The Examined Life: The Kernel of Lifelong Learning?

Communiversality is to bring ordinary members of the general public together and give them the opportunity to engage with academics in a way that both parties can benefit from. Without the shackles of homework and learning outcomes we can attempt a Socratic experience, every ComMUniversity should be considered an Agora. When registered students consider the questions that Socrates was asking, there is always the false framework of measurement and judgement and essays and another's validation of your thoughts. Socrates did not ask for 1500 words on any of the topics such as wisdom or justice (as far as we know) but just to be in debate with your thoughts, your experience and reflect and respond to the world around you by living in it. When ComMUniversity participants consider politics, history or economy they apply it to their own lives. The different functions should complement each other. It should all foster a highly skilled and educated workforce and a society that can consider difficult issues through discussion and debate.

D.OB.: Our contemporary context has been described as the 'post-truth' era. Do you think philosophy can in some way help people navigate the informational chaos we are faced with as we spend more and more of our time online?

D.B.: I am not sure if we are 'post-truth' or post-civilised. We have always been subject to fear around new technologies and the impact that they are having on society. I wonder about the introduction of Fire and whether at some point an irritated cave dweller thousands of years ago remarked that staring into the flames had killed the art of conversation. I do not fear the online world or Artificial Intelligence. That may be down to pure ignorance on my part but I think that in education at least we can really engage in being human, our quest should be that: the search for humanity. When you consider climate change, the terrible wars and violence that we see on our screens every day and the lack of urgency or even care that many of our leaders at least in the West show for people's suffering, then, when I am at my most fatalistic, I think 'bring on the robots, let them have it'. After my despair subsides and after a lot of soul searching, I think that redemption, if there is such a thing, will be found in 'others', in the people around us and that offers some succor.

The Examined Life: The Kernel of Lifelong Learning?

That said I am concerned that we might lose our soul or connection to our humanity by the use of screens among very young children who interact with them and substitute the real emotional bond between baby and carer. Attachment to an inanimate object mimicking Bion's container/contained relationship that manages emotional regulation might have consequences that are far reaching and of which we know little yet. Maybe that is our next evolutionary step, to become disconnected. Our capacity to 'be with' and 'learn from' is under threat from the online world where bots and algorithms are designed to persuade us that the world is a frightening place, and that fear should be our default emotion and anxiety our resting state. As our attention span shrinks there is no time for reverie and therefore no chance to metabolise or digest the constant stream of stimuli and turn these elements into fruitful thoughts. There are powerful interests that profit from this state of affairs. So maybe we are pre-apocalypse rather than post truth.

D.OB.: Typically, the younger the student the more prone they are to being convinced of certain beliefs, worldviews, and so on. In your experience, is the reverse true for mature students? More broadly, does indoctrination become harder the older one gets?

D.B.: I am not sure if you can say that being prone to certain beliefs is an age-related phenomenon. Older people have had more time to accumulate experience and so develop some capacity for discernment and hence wisdom but if a person does not reflect and ask the basic question about sources and how feelings get manipulated then one is as likely to be used by 'bad actors', as the saying goes, as much as the next person. This is why I believe the study of History is important. Historians have been looking for Fake-news and questioning sources at least since the time of Leopold Von Ranke.

If by indoctrination you mean accepting constructed narratives and being willing to act on them, again I think it comes down to having some understanding of Discourse from a Foucauldian perspective and being able to see where one is positioned within competing discourses. The unquestioning adoption of an imported Culture Wars narrative that sets the 'Left and the woke' up as a threat to a 'Traditional' version of Irish society, by certain sections of the Irish population is a case in point. This narrative has been parachuted into

The Examined Life: The Kernel of Lifelong Learning?

the Irish national conversation without any consideration of local or historical context. Here I believe it is extremely important to reflect on our emotions and ask why a particular article or video or tweet or whatever they are called now is 'making me feel this way'. If we reflect on this then we can ask ourselves without falling into an overworked sense of paranoia 'who is using me?'. It has been said that nationalism is the best route that those who experience 'blocked mobility' have to achieve status. It is to be expected that this will be on the agenda for at least some promoting a stagnant version of Irish identity and amplify this through social media. In the ComMUniversity we can reconnect with the Aristotelian idea that 'man [sic] is an animal of the polis'. The polis being in this case the community. In these small groups of up to 30 people, we can at least attempt to understand what's going on in an environment that lends itself to thought rather than reaction.

D.OB.: In terms of extending the reach and accessibility of higher-level education, you talk about demystifying expectations and democratising access. You also mention 'imposter syndrome'. What would you say has perpetuated the 'imposter' feeling amongst mature students? Do you think this is something younger students feel? Is this a larger, systemic issue?

D.B.: I think impostor syndrome starts early. We have all these children with all types of different talents and ways of understanding the world, only some of which are valued and so envy and jealousy and pain, these negative emotions enter the picture very early on. I have written about young kids checking out of maths as a subject when they are quite young because they take a bit longer than those with talent who get rewarded and have their ego boosted and reinforced everytime they are the first with their hand up with the right answer. How many people do you know who say, 'ah I am no good at maths', same with Irish although that seems to be changing. I have asked people in the ComMUniversity if they would be interested in doing a maths course and usually people say no because it brings up painful memories for them. I have a think piece due out in the PRISMⁱⁱ journal soon that deals with this in relation to handwriting and the older learner, so I will keep you posted when it goes live. People come to the ComMUniversity because they are curious, they stay because they are having their curiosity satiated in the non-

The Examined Life: The Kernel of Lifelong Learning?

threatening space of the library and they are made feel welcome.

For a lot of people, impostor syndrome is a real block for them to re-engage with education. The ComMUniversity and even more so the Return to Learning course are two programmes where I take a strengths based 'Capability Approach' that begins with the student and gradually turns up the content around a particular subject say philosophy or psychology, history or sociology etc. By starting from that position of strength, they find their way into the subject and become less self-conscious about studying an academic university subject. In this way they don't feel like imposters, but they can really be themselves.

As for younger students, I do not recall experiencing impostor syndrome from traditional First Year undergrads in my Critical Skills when I taught them. What they needed was the time and space to decompress from the Leaving Cert. ordeal they have just been through and to reorient them away from the idea that education means that their lecturers will provide them with answers. So, early on I would get students to ask themselves why they are in university. This might be the first time they have given this question any thought. When they have started to reflect on this then we can move on and ask, 'What is a university education for, or what do you learn in university?'. These questions are used to encourage discussion in class, and this is where they begin their university education. In my opinion the purpose of a university education is to learn how to ask a question. This is after all the essence of Research. Whatever the question is, it does not matter. The point is that for the first time we are encouraged to be the authors of our own lifeworld and not slaves to a textbook that provides all the answers. Ultimately, it is about them recognising their own desire to know. And that's what it boils down to really, isn't it, the desire to know. Will AI desire to know anything?

D.OB.: What—for you—are the characteristics of a good teacher?

D.B.: Being interested in people, having a willingness to take a risk and trust the student/participant and being willing to learn from our students/participants.

D.OB.: Excellent, thank you very much for taking the time to answer our questions. I think there is a lot of overlap in terms of our basic understanding of the Irish education system and the possible role of philosophy within it—especially in terms of it being resistant to change. I particularly like the way you describe the ComMUniversity as an ‘Agora’ and the image of Socrates handing out 1500 word essays. It was a pleasure to discuss and reflect upon your perhaps ‘too radical’ views on things—thank you.

D.B.: Thank you for the opportunity.

Bibliography

Barter, D., and Hyland, S., ‘The Communiversity: A partnership approach to community engaged adult education’, *eucen Studies: eJournal of University Lifelong Learning*, Vol 7 (2023). [Link] <https://doi.org/10.53807/0701f8fs> [Full-Text]

Barter, D., ‘The Older Learner (and Teacher)’(2023).[Blog] [Link]
<https://dacemaynooth.com/2023/09/22/lifelong-learning-and-the-older-learner-and-teacher/>

ⁱ Coillte is Ireland’s State owned commercial forestry company.

ⁱⁱ Barter, D, <https://prismeducationjournal.wordpress.com/2025/08/18/the-stifling-role-of-learning-outcomes-from-a-freirean-bionic-perspective/> PRISM Casting a New Light on Learning Theory and Practice August, 2025.