Community Education: Perspectives from the Margins

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Abstract

This article delineates community education by exploring the wider contexts underlying the field. It associates community education with adult education, popular education and community development. It reviews the historical bases, from radical workers' education, to empowering self-help. It depicts the facets of community education arising from these sources, and links praxis - the dynamics of methods and knowledge bases - with critical citizenship and democracy. It provides an overview of the applications of community education, from community building to consciousness raising, from health education to human rights, to illuminate its scope and use, with examples drawn from the South and North.

Glossary

Consciousness raising

An increasing of concerned awareness especially of some social or political issue.

Empowerment

To promote self actualization or influence

Praxis

In the context of community education, praxis connotes the synergy of activism and reflection, in order to bring about a more just and equal society.
'really useful methods'

'Really useful knowledge'

This concept was developed in the nineteenth century to critique dominant forms of knowledge, and to contribute to changing all forms of domination while simultaneously promoting democracy and social amelioration. 'Really useful knowledge' underpins the reflection in praxis.

'Really useful methods'

These include ways of working with learners to enhance democracy, participation and equality. These methods underpin the activism in praxis.

Keywords

Capacity building; caring processes; communities of place, interest and practice; community development; consciousness raising; critical citizenship; democracy building; macro-micro integration; praxis.

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Community Education

Introduction

Any discussion on community education must take into account that perspectives vary from context to place. Community education may be seen as an extension of a pragmatic education service designed to target hard-to-reach people, and integrate them into the mainstream, through employment, further education, or rehabilitation. It may be interpreted as a dimension of community development, empowering powerless people to address their own educational and social needs. It also may be perceived as an adjunct to civil society, in which citizenship and participation are enhanced and strengthened. It may be named and understood in different ways too. Terms such as non-formal adult education, outreach, extra-mural, liberal adult education, locally-based adult education, lifelong learning, training and informal adult education are also used as synonyms for community education in different circumstances. Further, community education, positioned within the meanings of community, may be construed as a caring process, with a big emphasis on relationship and interpersonal connection, with the attendant focus on processes and methods shaped to enhance these caring qualities. This article will discuss these myriad dimensions, in the context of exploring differing perspectives and contexts. I will discuss the historical foundations before looking at the different facets of community education. I will then consider a wide breadth of concrete examples of community education, in the context of inherent differences and ambiguities. Finally, I will appraise the discussion to establish common ground for deepening critical democracy in these changing times.

Historical Foundations

The story of community education is somewhat elusive, but this section outlines that story to provide a backdrop to its scope and some concrete examples on the ground. Lynn Tett documented the development of community education in Scotland, identifying the recommendations of the Alexander Report as the milestones of the current practice of

community education. These recommendations led to the Community Education Service, to examine non-vocational adult education. The recommendations were strongly influenced by the understanding that adult education should help to address social disadvantage endured by several groups, such as lone parents, unemployed people, early school leavers, and minority ethnic groups. Further, the report recommended that community education ought to nurture a pluralist democracy, by managing the tensions between state policies, and community politics. These landmarks were congruent with the historical sources of adult education for working class people. Crowther (1999) traces the lineage of community education with the radical working class organisations of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This source was hard-fought, and wrested from the grip of the mainstream schooling and education. In Denmark, Grundtvig founded the Folkhighschools with the explicit objective of providing space for learning for citizenship. The legacy of the Folkhighschools included a strong linkage with social movements, particularly with the co-operative movement, contributing to the foundations for the welfare society in the Nordic regions. Further, the model is one of non-formal education, elevating the value of education *per se* (Smith, 2007).

In Northern Ireland, the part that community education played in the development of the peace process has yet to be assessed fully, but Lovett's earlier work in England was influential at practical as well as theoretical levels when he moved back to Northern Ireland. In Lovett (1971) he reflected on his early community based practice, maintaining that adult and community education must be much more than the provision of classes, in that it must also be integral to the whole community and must also be a communal activity.

In the Irish Republic, women's community education developed within a setting of difficulties, from the isolation of new suburbs, high unemployment and emigration, coupled with the destructive war in Northern Ireland and the improvement of the status of women. The literature on the sphere is sparse due to the growth in a non-formal, non-academic manner, probably unique in education initiatives in that it was created, fostered and supported by non-educationalists (Connolly, 2003). Slowey noted the early days of

adult education in the community, especially the adult education organised and conducted by women on the ground, (Slowey, 1985). Bassett, *et al* (1989), made the case for adult education and emancipation, emanating from the work of AONTAS, when it became more apparent that adult education was changing enormously through the phenomenon of the women's community education growth and development. By the time I did a small study looking at my own experience of women's community education, it was clear that women's community education was totally different to the traditional provision of night classes in empty-ish schools or universities, based on liberal studies and leisure courses, in three specific aspects: the processes and methods, which I named 'really useful methods', relating this concept to Thompson's 'really useful knowledge', which underpinned the content, in addition to the total learning environment. Women's community education offered programmes of non-formal and formal adult education, but it also provided the space for informal learning, plus, vitally, childcare within caring, supportive settings (Connolly, 1989). That is, community education, whether supported by educational institutions, sponsored by communities, or arising from difficult lifeworlds, provides a way of responding to oppression and discrimination, particularly by building the capacity of the learners, in their own personal development and, crucially, in their communal and social development.

Thus, these historical foundations locates community education within the milieu of community concerns, including the very difficult, deep divisions in Northern Ireland, or the almost intractable issues around suburban isolation, early school leaving, drug addiction, environmental concerns and unemployment.

While this historical overview is scant, and elides numerous milestones, it serves the purpose of illuminating the rootedness of community education in the social agenda of liberation, problem-solving and self-determination. The next section looks more closely at the facets of community education that helps to illuminate the flexibility and resourcefulness that enables it to respond to the breadth of issues.

Facets of Community Education

This section will endeavour to explore the facets of community education and to discuss the implications. The understandings of the term *community* will be discussed in greater depth later on, but as a marker, community in this context is used in the sense of the physical location in which people live, that is, place; or in the sense of the community of interest, the social network of people who share a common interest, such as the Irish in the USA. Or community may be applied to the group of practitioners, a quasi-functional meaning, such as the community of educators, social workers, doctors or the like. The principles of community education, identified by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Association, in Ireland, include the rootedness of community education in social justice and the process of empowerment, which aims to build the capacity of local people to respond to educational and structural disadvantage and to participate in decision making and policy creation (2004: 18). That is, AONTAS aligns its perspective with the ideological positioning of working towards addressing the causes of disadvantage and inequality. On the other hand, Smith (2009) draws a thumbnail definition: 'education for the community within the community'. He views that community is not just the place, or context of the education programme; building the community is also a central concern. Thus, the overlap between AONTAS and Smith is this core concern with community. Implied in building community is the process of working on relationships between members of the community, in order to enhance their lived experience.

Thompson delineates the ways of working in community education as specific and purposeful. She includes formal education, that is, adult education with credentials; informal adult education that occurs within social networks, such as the breaks between classes; and non-formal adult education, with no credentials. She holds that the processes work with people's life experience and it connects issues, ideas and understanding to political action. These processes also foster practical skills, which help people to overcome alienation, as well as increasing their capacity for employment and participation. Finally, she contends that community education helps to build self-esteem as well as enabling people to understand others' perspectives (2002: 9-11). That is, Thompson builds the ground in community education between the person and the

communal, the individual and the social. And by including credentials, she sides conclusively with the contention that community education can embrace the full range of education, from basic literacy and numeracy, to certificates, diplomas and degrees.

Community education may also straddle the divide between institutionally sourced adult education and the kind of education that arises from the people themselves. McGivney (2000) in her study of outreach adult education for marginal groups, for example, unemployed men, traces the factors which underpinned its success. These factors included the ways of working with the learners, relationships and methods, the response to community issues and support for community groups. Outreach in this sense comprised the provision of programmes from universities or other education providers, but the processes and methods are not those of institutional-centred provision; rather they are responsive and relevant to the learners' lives. McGivney's research echoes closely with the experience in Ireland, with women's community education.

Below, the graphic endeavours to capture the facets of community education, including the contradictions and ambiguities. It revolves around the centrality of the learners, a key component of community education, not just in terms of the processes and methods, but also in terms of meaning, experience and responsiveness.

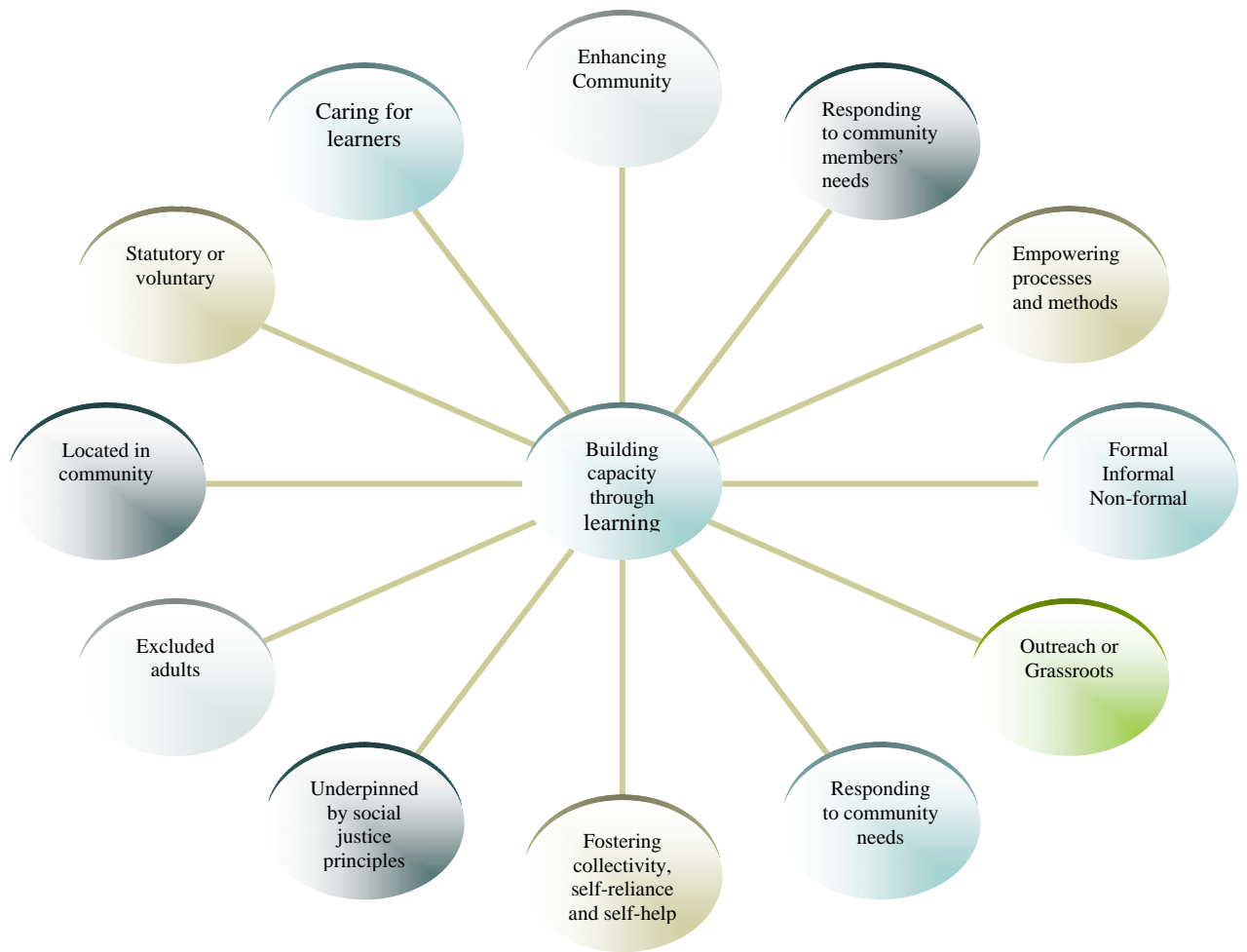Figure 1 depicts the facets of community education and the breadth of scope.

Figure 1: Facets of Community Education

These myriad facets demonstrate the breadth of community education, and these dimensions are reflected in concrete examples on the ground. The next section will discuss cases of community education in specific exemplary contexts.

International Examples

A rudimentary review of community education reveals concrete examples in many contexts throughout the globe. This section provides a summary of these examples, in order to illuminate the ways in which societies engage with community education.

Community education is found in contexts as diverse as a middle-class, affluent city in the USA to a rural childbirth project in Kenya. These diverse examples include content-centred education, with the focus on information and resources; process-centred, with the focus on participative creative methods; or a combination of both, depending on the circumstances. They are also practiced in groups, in e-learning and in one-to-ones, employing basic resources on the one hand, and technology on the other, by a variety of educators, from peers to outsider professionals.

UNESCO has been at the forefront of the harnessing of community education for community, cultural, social and personal development. The aim of meeting the learning needs of adults as well as children and youth by 2015, is addressed by programmes and targets on adult literacy, gender and equality, HIV/AIDS education, and so on. This commitment to the use of community education as the means of addressing extremely difficult issues is evident in the examples outlined below.

In terms of the approach, the Australian agency, the Public Interest Advocacy Centre focuses on the use of information as the medium for community education. They supply a series of information leaflets, what Thompson (1996) terms 'really useful knowledge' in their human rights community education. These information fact sheets are designed to reach out to people on the ground with background and strategies on civil, political and human rights. The audience/learners include people from new communities, people who have come to Australia as refugee and asylum seekers and other vulnerable people. They can access the information at a distance, through the website.

In contrast, the indigenous community is the subject another concrete example of community education, this time in Canada, in the Kehewin Community Education Centre. The overall objectives include the raising of awareness about the culture and practices of the Native Americans, in order to enhance the lives of both Native and non-Native communities. They undertake this through dance, theatre as well as education. That is, the knowledge base is drawn from the traditional wisdom and practices within the Native community, and the learners are engaged in face-to-face creative processes.

The Grassroots Alliance for Community Education, GRACE, with a headquarters in the USA, works as an NGO in Africa, in a number of countries, with the objective of building the capacity of local people to take control over their own lives, by improving household health and welfare. Their processes include peer educator training, which enables members of communities to relate to one another in an educational way, forming networks with local organisations. The agency trains local people, who use their knowledge to improve the health and welfare of families and households. Their interventions range from HIV/AIDS awareness, and consciousness raising about the illegality of female genital mutilation, to work with traditional birth attendants. That is, GRACE works in specific African countries, at one remove from the grassroots, empowering local educators in order to gradually change traditional beliefs which endanger lives. Africa is also the source for the materials that many community educators have worked with for over twenty years, *Training for Transformation* (Hope and Timmel, 1985). These resources were inspired by the work of Freire, and are balanced between the 'really useful knowledge' of social analysis on the one hand, with the creative methods and processes that have characterised community education ever since. These texts were located firmly in the grassroots of community participation, and this work parallels the educational initiatives in Latin America

In Latin America, popular education fulfils the role of community education for adults, that is, education for grassroots, fundamental social change. Freire's work is evident in popular education and social movements, hinged on participative processes together with political and social analysis. For example, Gadotti (1992) shows the role of participation in popular in consciousness raising, and also in the strengthening of community control over the state. This role for popular education/community education is a key conduit in bringing democracy to the continent with its troubled relationship with the USA. Interestingly, the GATEWAY project in the Washington DC area uses the community education approach to enable recent immigrants from Latin America to the USA connect with people who have experienced multiple barriers such as lack of education and low income, using the full span of community education methods processes to motivate and

empower the learners on the issues around HIV/AIDS. That is, the purposeful intervention of community education is designed to sensitively address traditional beliefs in new communities in order to enable them to stay safe and healthy, through small group or one-to-one educational settings. The use of community education in the USA ranges from the life and death issue of health and welfare, to community problem solving.

With regards to problem solving, when I reviewed *community education* on the internet, one of the first references to community education led me to the Government of Wisconsin website. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction outlines its perspective, with a set of principles which underpins its version of community education. These principles include the principles of self-determination, self-help, social inclusiveness and formal and informal learning, in order to meet the needs of local people, provided as close as possible to those who want it. This focus on self-determination and self-help also features in a community education initiative in South East Asia, which straddles the Wisconsin principles, but with an environmental dimension that protects the earth's resources for the benefit of humanity, that is, macro-micro integration. Further, while many community educational objectives include the sensitive challenge to traditional beliefs, especially with regards to health, childbirth and FGM, in contrast, the Southeast Asia Regional Initiatives for Community Empowerment (SEARICE), promotes traditional knowledge of farming communities to protect them from the recent trends in agricultural production, with the attendant limiting of genetic diversity, and the copyrighting of seeds. The processes used in this community empowerment focuses on information, lobbying, and advocacy. In contrast with the Wisconsin model, whereby the principles denote that community is a self-contained entity, a sub-set of the state, but autonomous and self–regulating rather than state controlled or supported, SEARICE sees the community as an integral dimension of the state - and the planet - but which needs to empower itself against the onslaught of the market. That is, the environmental concerns are held by the community, a huge burden in both the micro sense of making a living, and also in the macro sense of saving the planet.

On the other hand, the Scottish government locates the responsibility for community education firmly with the state, defining it as informal learning and social development, to strengthen communities by improving the capacity and knowledge of the community members. Further, it has prioritised community learning with the commitment to raising the educational attainments of adults, particularly literacy and numeracy, but also to support young people and to promote involvement with the planning and delivery of local services. Thus, the term community education is applied to the hands-on version of the Scottish Government, to enhance democracy and participation, while the Wisconsin principles imply a hands-off approach, promoting self-sufficiency and independence. The Scottish Executive overtly locates community education within the social justice agenda, while Wisconsin Government perceives community education as enhancing the community, improving services and facilities, and applying not just to adults, but also the schooling for children.

This overview of examples of community education on the ground, while superficial, illuminates the breadth of the field. It also shows the differences and contradictions, indicating the problem of delineation. The next section will discuss these differences in order to establish the common ground in community education.

Contradictions and Ambiguities

Specific cases of community education have underlying contradictions, indicating the ideological understandings that underpin the practice. Tett (2002) discusses these inconsistencies with her discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of the hands-on state promotion of community education, with her reflections on the experience in Scotland. The key difficulty in the implementation of government policy is the high expectations of community education to solve deep structural inequalities. This imposes unrealistic burdens on community educators and the communities they serve. Community educators are faced with a deep ambiguity. On the one hand, they are left with the responsibility for driving change at the most grassroots levels, sometimes under-funded and undervalued, in comparison to other educational institutions. On the other hand, they

remain quite invisible in the overall perception, seen as facilitators of change rather than actors and agents. Further, Tett contends, community educators cannot attain the same professional standards for their work that other educators can, because the role is diffuse, unspecified and undefined (2002:12). This is all the more the case when the educators are members of the communities, subject to the barriers that the other members endure. The task of addressing social inequality is contingent on the re-distribution of power and resources, underpinned by the clarity of the vision of the just society. Teaching egalitarianism also needs access to the body of knowledge that illuminates the causes of inequality, what Thompson (1996) calls 'really useful knowledge', that is, knowledge that enables people to understand the social forces that shape society. As the case studies show, sometimes the knowledge is traditional and honoured, while at other times, traditional knowledge is dangerous, especially in regards to gendered health and welfare. Thus, access to 'really useful knowledge' is problematic, and can be controlled according to the beliefs of the animators.

Moreover, with such high expectations of community education, the responsibility for fundamental change is also problematic. When the responsibility for justice-based change is left with the most powerless, it has very little prospect for success. For political leaders, advocating and supporting community education does convey the *appearance* of concern with addressing inequity, but in effect, the *status quo* prevails.

Further, in relation to the continuum between the local and the global, the globalized influences of economic and cultural capital impinge in an incalculable way on the individual, the community, and community educator. That is, the needs which communities identify, for example, drug misuse, unemployment or environmental degradation or appropriation may have sources completely outside the control of the local level. The solutions to these issues reside at the global level yet there is an expectation that community education can armour people against them, say, by drug education, community enterprise or ecological activism, on the one hand, or animate the people to act against them. Community education advocates indicate that local people, if they corral resources, if they network with like-minded groups, and if they develop leadership,

can work to overcome the deep structural divisions of race and ethnicity. As a principle, the vision of the inclusive society is commendable, yet the causes of divided communities are not *just* endemic racism, ageism, and other discriminations, destructive as they are, but also globalized economic and cultural trends.

Thus, community education reaches difficult to reach people and communities, but not just that: it reaches difficult issues and trends, and as such, bears the burden of high expectations that it can actually resolve quite intractable social problems, as well as dealing very effectively with other social issues. This raises the question about the nature of community, in which the community education operates. The next section discusses the connotations of community in this context.

Community Connotations

The term *community* is ambiguous and loose. Mayo (1994) contends that it is notorious for its shiftiness, yet it is very useful for application to smaller sub-sets of society and to collectivities and communal dynamics. Raymond Williams (1976), in his discussion on the meanings and connotations of the term, traced the usage, originally referring to the common people, that is, peasants rather than people of rank. However, the connotation changed eventually to meanings closer to current usage, that is, the sharing of common characteristics and identity, and underpinned by relationship. Further, when the word is used, it conveys warm and persuasive sentiments. Thompson (2002) agrees with Williams that community has a 'feel-good' factor associated with it that is difficult to undermine or challenge. She regards that community as a concept provides the space for security and common understandings. But she adds that community is frequently applied to others, that is, to poorer people, ethnic groups and so on.

Toennies (1957) provided the discussion on *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* which helped to develop insight into the characteristics of smaller social groups and looser associative relationships. These characteristics, though drawing on the contrasting traditional rural society versus urban industrialised society, nevertheless, enable the appreciation of

experience of the post-modern city, and the large, isolated suburban enclaves, in which huge populations endeavour to find common ground with the neighbours, and common identities with like-minded people, to overcome alienation and feeling alone.

The term community can also convey a more caring dimension than the larger institutional or social entity. Thus, in finding commonality, human relationships and constructions move into the central position, together with the sense of having some level of control over the immediate milieu. Harvey (1989) contends that different classes construct their sense of territory and community in radically different ways. He gives the example that middle classes can focus on 'tone': that is, controlling the status of the locality, by ensuring that undesirable residents or developments are kept out. On the other hand, working classes protect relationships, characterising the quality of the community in terms of good, supportive and present neighbours. Harvey is obviously concerned with class, primarily, but additional analysis shows that there are other differences including gender, race and ethnicity. For example, Irish Travellers refer to themselves as a community, with a strong emphasis on kinship, custom and tradition, with a distinct culture that differentiates them from the rest of the populations. This is not static, of course, but the influences from modern Irish society are mediated through the filter of the culture, rendering them 'encultured', so that any new phenomenon takes on a distinct Traveller flavour.

However, the term is very useful in community education, as it conveys the small-scale nature of it; the close relationships, including those of caring, inclusion and supporting; the flexibility and shifting nature of it, particularly with regards to its responsiveness; the closeness of the provision to the learners and their contexts and the ways in which it overcomes the estranging language that was more typical, such as outreach and extra-mural, liberal adult education, locally based adult education or more critically orientated versions, such as emancipatory, popular, or empowering education.

Government of Ireland (2000) evaluates these characteristics, and endeavours to encompass the scope of community education by acknowledging that it reaches large

numbers of people, often in disadvantaged settings. Community education also pioneers new ways of working with learning groups, in non-hierarchical processes. Finally, the lived experience of the learners provides the starting point for the learning. Thus, community education is framed as educational, in terms of processes and methods; communal, in terms of groups, both learning groups and community groups; and egalitarian, in terms of organisation and responding to the needs of disadvantaged communities.

Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to capture the dimensions and facets of community education, not only delineating it, but also illuminating the demands and stresses that shape the practice on the ground. While the origins have a diffuse lineage, from the concern with workers' rights, to the desire to strengthen civil society, community education is subjected to a series of dialectical pulls and pushes, which ensures the dynamic, process-oriented development of the field.

Community education evolved with this complex, dynamic interaction of grass roots organic growth, and statutory or pioneering animation. However, regardless of the provision, the ownership of the process remains with the participants. The commuity-centred approach ensures that learners participate freely, and the subjective experience of the participants is considered vital and transformative. Community education is located within the community and of the community.

Egalitarianism, which is very complex in itself, enables the learners to raise their consciousness about their own lives as well as the lives of other, engaged in the analysis of inequality. Freire's (1972) praxis connects the learning with activism, in a continuous cycle. The content of 'really useful knowledge', (Thompson, 1996) contributes to the potential for societal transformation.

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Biography

I have worked as an adult educator for nearly twenty-five years. I started out in community education as it developed in Ireland, before moving on to the academic world, in the Department of Adult and Community Education, National University of Ireland Maynooth. My research interests revolve around community education and I am particularly interested in critical pedagogy, gender, equality and groupwork in adult and community education.