

# The War against People: Adult education practice for critical democracy

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the role of adult education for critical democracy, in order to address the social suffering (Bourdieu, 1999) that we encounter in our work as critical adult community educators. We explore this through dialogue, as a process of education and research. Dialogue is the moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it (Shor, Freire, 1987: 13). The purpose of dialogue is to transform social relations, in the learning environment and in our community of practice, a key way of creating new knowledge. Also, we contend that dialogue is a process of joint autoethnographic research that examines experience, in order to understand cultural practices, (Ellis, *et al*, 2011). Further, congruent with our pedagogies, autoethnography treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act (Adams and Holman Jones, 2008). This article developed out of dialogue that we have had for years, but which we formalised only recently. We consider dialogue as a pivot, based on Freire's contention that education is a conversation rather than a curriculum (1972). Further, our dialogue is underpinned by reflexivity, particularly using ourselves in research and practice (Etherington, 2004). Reflexivity remains in the domain of the academic if we are not mindful that our purpose is to change the world, echoing Marx and Engels' thesis that:

*The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is, however, to change it.*

(Thesis 11, 1845)

Further, Shor and Freire (1987) use dialogue to profile their conceptual construction, resulting in an accessible account of liberatory pedagogy. A central tenet of this dialogue is that critical educators are both activists and artists, with attention to both liberation and creativity. In our identities as educators and researchers, we regard the creative dimension of adult and community education as crucial. It is possible to talk about creativity in education as meaning a critical discussion on art, culture and nature but, more interestingly, an appreciation of the joy of generating meaning, creating paradigms, and stimulating ideas. We believe that the point of education is to build the capacity of our students to challenge the forces which maintain the unequal *status quo*: adult education for critical democracy. Critical democracy is embedded in collective action for building an equal and just society, significantly more than representative democracy, and more than active citizenship, which remains located in the personal and individual non-transformative activism. This capacity is nourished with *really useful knowledge*, (Thompson, 2007) but also with what we term *really useful practice*. Really useful practice as the exercise of really useful knowledge is the manifestation of praxis (Freire, 1972) and we wish to explore this at a deeper level in this article. We will look at the scope of our work, the use of the personal to articulate the political and social, and finally, the dangers of co-option and colonisation of really useful practice.

#### *The Practice*

My work falls equally into both the academic and the community-based. The common theme that runs through it all is *the way* that I work. So I would use the same method with all of the groups, whether they are a group of Traveller men, or a group of MA students. And the aim of that work is to try and bring some critical awareness to what it is that the individual learner sees himself or herself doing. This is done with a view to looking at themselves in the context of wider society.

Peter: The *methods* I use are inspired by Freire (1972) and drawn from Boal (1998). If I'm working with MA or Doctoral students the focus of the work will be on the practitioners as theorists. If I'm working with community groups the focus will be on the groups' concerns, but I will use Freirean and Boalian *methods*, emphasising the practice and not the theory.

Bríd: I work with people returning to education for the first time, right across to the doctoral level. The biggest single group I work with are people studying to be adult and further educators, but I work with other groups like

the MA students, and I work with the non-formal sector, for example, community education facilitators.

For me, adult and community education is different to the scope of work in all other education sectors. It is contingent on pedagogical expertise rather than in teaching subjects. Adult educators do have a knowledge base, appropriate to the level of accreditation, but *really useful practice* is transferable across this entire spectrum (Connolly, 2008).

Peter: I came from both theatre and education. My first experience of adult and community education was participating as a young student on the Higher Diploma in Adult Education. I just knew that the other education courses were not what I was looking for and I knew from conversations with other students that the ideas, approaches of adult education would engage me more. The HDip allowed me to merge theatre and education into a useful practice.

Learning, for me, involved engaging multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). And so, adult and community education offered me opportunities to explore, using physical activity, discussion, reflection, emotion, imagination and thinking as tools for learning. It is the overlap of theatre and education that interests me. In theatre I have divided my time between community-based participatory practice and artist-led projects. I have always viewed theatre as a learning space, in which people co-create meaning and generate models of being human. In the theatre space, practitioners and audience are *imagers*—each group is engaged in the exercise of their imagination and in the discovery of what it means to be free. Similarly, in the classroom or community hall, groups of individuals come together to create meaning, using a different set of tools perhaps, but also aiming to understand themselves and their world better so that they can be liberated within it. I agree completely with Edward Bond (2000), who maintains that imagination and its use is the key tool in the work for social justice.

Brid: When I started in adult education first I started from a very political position, teaching Women's Studies. Even though I was a gormless eejit when I started, the scope was from the personal to the political. Women's studies came about in the late 1960s in the USA, along with the emergence of political activism, such as the civil rights movement (Pilcher, Whelehan,

2008: 176). When I studied adult education theory, I saw that it was parallel to the Freirean literacy movement and civil rights education. Women's studies emerged in Ireland in the late seventies and early 80s, supported by daytime education, (Inglis and Basset, 1988). There were also feminist radio programmes and feminist support agencies like the Rape Crisis Centres and Women's Aid.

However, the anti-feminist backlash emerged in the eighties. Many women and men in Ireland were deeply traumatised by the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign and the Anti-Divorce Campaign (O'Reilly, 1992). The new trend, which became known as women's community education (AONTAS, 2011, Connolly, 2003, etc) responded to the needs of the learners, managing to work around the backlash. The new programmes, from creative writing to social studies, were underpinned with the feminist agenda of liberation. This was affirmed by the White Paper (2000) and subsequently, with new writing (AONTAS, 2003) and new research, (AONTAS, 2011).

I saw the personal in social contexts. Each year since I started, I met with people who have had appalling suffering in their lives. Just look at the extent of rape, domestic violence, murder, men assaulting other men, child abuse, the exploitation of domestic workers in the private domain, sub-human housing; all those trafficked in the sex industry; the violence of organised crime; intimidation at community levels; the survivors of institutions such as Magdalene laundries; survivors of institutional childhood sexual abuse. Bourdieu (1999) argues that everyday lives are submerged in social suffering, caused by social institutions of work, housing, education, the family and community. It is like a war against people.

Peter: Who do you think is winning the war?

Bríd: I thought that the war was so huge that it *was* unwinnable, but now I believe that adult community education is helping to tip the balance in the other direction. Community education provides the space for people to explore the causes of social suffering, because is active and analytical.

### **Social and Personal Analysis**

Peter: The analysis of society must first begin with an analysis of the personal?

Brid: Some people think that it's more important to start with the social rather than with the personal. It is to do with the process. For some groups, we start with the social, but for others, the personal. If a woman is in the throes of an abusive relationship, it is not helpful to explain this is patriarchal power. That woman's experience of violence is so *visceral*, that we start with where she's at.

Peter: She needs a deep understanding of patriarchal power systems, but not an academic one. The older the groups are that I work with, the more aware they are of systems that are in place, policies that impact on them, political movements, and history and culture, and various other factors in society that effect them. My job is about trying to encourage learners in finding a way to position themselves, their learning, their history, and what it is they want to do, *in* that wider context. I'm not interested, for example, in the kind of critical reflection which focuses only on the question: *who am I as a person?* I'm not interested in therapy, in the formation of one's personality. The sessions I do never go down that road, nor do they ever look at the individual as a person shaped by intimate things. We look at the individual shaped by social and cultural factors as opposed to shaped by concerns such as '*What was my position in my family?*' Or '*Did I get enough food growing up?*' Or, you know, '*Was I loved enough by my family?*' So it's not a therapeutic type of education, that's not the goal. It's much more about looking at social systems, for example, '*How did I relate to the school system? How did I feel about the way society wanted me to become a man, or what images presented themselves to me culturally about being a woman? How are the messages being portrayed to me and my family about being a Traveller? How are these messages constructed?*' So, in my workshops we are moving the focus away from the idea that social suffering is an individual's fault. We're trying to look at it in a wider, systemic way. I believe they need to focus on structures of power so that learners can begin to influence systems; articulate their political point of view; and try and change the culture, as opposed to changing themselves.

As opposed to what I do, the focus of the personal-based work - which I would call drama therapy or therapeutic education - is about changing *yourself*. I'm trying to get people to look at themselves and assess how *systems* have met - or failed to meet - their needs as learners. If they are *in charge* of systems, for example, at doctoral level, then we are looking at how they

perpetuate oppressive power structures. We might also explore how they can *open up* systems to suit learners' needs.

Bríd: Recently, a PhD student spoke about an interview that she conducted. The interviewee revealed a lot of personal stuff, but the student was very concerned that it would sound like therapy if she listened to somebody talking about her life: *Is this therapy or education?* As adult educators, our work is to help them to see experience in the context of wider systems. If a person is a victim of something appalling, such as domestic violence, we should see that in terms of power structures in society. I realised that we are setting ourselves up as critics of psychotherapy (Morrell, 2008). However, we don't aim to diminish therapy, because people have benefited hugely from psychotherapeutic interventions, especially feminist psychotherapy, which goes far beyond *what did I do that brought this on?* We have to help people to see the *systemic* reasons for their condition.

### **Critical Facilitation**

Peter: Is there an adult education theory that proposes a psychotherapeutic type of work?

Bríd: No, but it's easy to interpret the process as therapeutic because we start where people are at. Some influential theories come from psychotherapy, for example, cognitive behaviourism, which takes the view that evidence of learning is the change in behaviour (Skinner, 1974). Communication is one of these ones, which is underpinned by the idea that we change our mode of communication; we change our relationships (Dickson, 2002). But it does not always hold true. If our rights are abused, it's not good enough to say that all we can change is ourselves. We can work to change society, so that *everyone's* rights are respected.

Also, a humanistic approach (Rogers, 1969) has been significantly influential in all of education. The person-centred approach is part of the language of adult education, as well as in primary and early childhood education. What is problematic is that it stays in the personal. We don't all have the same understanding of the social. For example, when we as adult educators work with groups, I see those groups made up of people coming with their social identities; they bring their gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and status with them. Other educators might see them as bringing their childhood trauma-

mas, ego, unconscious desires and need for attention, into the group. These include facilitators coming from a psychodynamic approach (Bion, 1961). This psychodynamic approach can be really useful in adult education, when we are trying to uncover what is *really* going on in the group. For example, the concept of *projection* helps learners to reveal their real inner struggles. The crucial concept is *transference*, where people bring their earlier experience of education into the adult learning environment, seeing the facilitator as a figure of power.

Peter: They see the facilitator as a solver of problems?

Brid: What we have to realize, is that this *isn't* an unconscious *personal* attribute. Authoritarian figures absolutely *demand* that kind of reverence and respect. If anything is hidden, it's the hidden agenda in society.

In the case of domestic violence, the psychotherapeutic approach might say that a woman is trying to redress issues of her childhood. The adult education approach will say that domestic violence is not just because one woman, or indeed, child or man, has childhood issues. It is the exercise of power.

Peter: I would see the exploration of power as unquestionably the focus of adult education. As I mentioned earlier, much of my work is about exploring who has access to power, how are decisions of importance made, who is seen as powerful etc. In addition, as adult educators we have to explore the methods we use with our learners to understand how we ourselves use power and status in our teaching. Is there a danger, for example, that I assist learners to become dependent on me for their own learning? Or am I the only source of the knowledge? Do I control and shape the learning that goes on? Do I micro-manage the process of learning for others? One of the essential considerations, as an adult educator, is to look at your own behaviour in a room: where you are coming in and colonizing the room or taking charge unconsciously out of a desire to care. I've written about this in the *Jesus of Rio Syndrome* (2000). And you know that notion of cosseting the group or over-minding them? And solving all the problems of the group? It's very difficult to resist that temptation; particularly if the pressure comes from groups who want you to solve their problems ... they have a lot of powerful arguments for you to do that. For example, '*We have paid for you do this. We have paid to be taught. So, teach us. You know, otherwise we can go off and do something else.*'

So they exert a quiet pressure on you to *take charge, to manage and to make decisions* about the learning the group makes. Another persuasive argument from learners is *'You are responsible under health and safety for our safety and our welfare, and for our environment in this group. So solve any problems that arise which affect us.'* These arguments are very powerful and they are hard to resist. Another, more personal challenge to the facilitator is responding to the desire to be liked. The threat can be made: *'We won't like you anymore if you don't keep us happy. We'll rate you as a bad facilitator.'*

I encountered that very recently in a group of young people. Two new people joined the group and they were being disruptive. The older ones in the group wanted me to exclude the newcomers on behalf of the group. They didn't express this to me, but they expected that I should see the problem and solve it. When this didn't happen, they spent a whole week in anger. Eventually, one of them approached me. He said, 'We want you to sort this out. I was angry all week thinking about the way they disrupted our group.' I replied, 'Well, what did you do about that?' And he was completely taken aback by that question. He said 'Well, it's not up to me to do anything about it – it's up to *you* to do something about it.' And I could see clearly where he was coming from of course, he had all these arguments. But in this situation there was absolutely no learning going on. Instead there was a transferring of responsibilities. They were falling into that conditional behaviour of saying *you do the job for me.*

Brid: Transference or exercise of power?

Peter: It's a learned behaviour that produces a set of expectations – in this case, the expectation is that a strong, authoritative, and controlling teacher solves all the groups' problems. So this group, working with me, transferred that persona onto me and expected me to fulfil the expected role. Take for example, the idea of the Class Representative in some third level adult education courses. Initially, this is a sort of administrative role, someone who would gather data, distribute information to the group, liaise with the department etc. Now it's often the person a group expects to be their Solver-Of-Problems. The one they expect to do all the complaining. Or the one they expect to do all of the organising of an event. Of course, on the other hand, one of the group is often only too ready and willing to step into that role, and will want to fulfil all those expectations. And may be *put out* when the

whole group, and not them as Class Rep, has to solve the problems. Power structures, power balances, and power plays are very interesting to me as an educator and as a theatre director. I am a little too obsessed with it as a theme, if I'm honest! I seem to look for it and eventually locate it in every piece of work I do, whether it's devising a youth theatre show, or teaching about creative methods of facilitation.

Sometimes I don't have to look for the problem of *power-less-ness* in a group. For example, a few months ago, a colleague asked me to work for a day with a post-graduate group. She said they were disengaged with the programme, and even though they'd now been in university for three or four years, they had not built the confidence to express what they were feeling in the group. They were unable, for example, to speak out when they disagreed with another student. Neither did they feel able to question what they were being taught. When I met the group, they fairly quickly outlined several complaints they had about the course they were doing. I asked if they'd expressed their concerns to the department, and they said 'No.' They gave various reasons for this, such as 'I expect the lecturers to interpret my disengagement as a critical commentary, and to respond by making things better.' Or 'I'm too shy to speak out in the group' or 'I'm afraid if I say something critical it will be held against me.' In fact, they were putting themselves in their own way. None of them wanted to take that huge opportunity for learning which is embodied in *risk*, doing something unexpected, seeing what would happen if they *challenged* or *went against the current*. They wanted someone else to do it for them because they were afraid of the consequences. This fear of the consequences of challenging is of course an old weapon used against the people in the war, isn't it? Don't buck the system or you will be punished severely. Don't challenge the authority because it will isolate you and banish you from its favour. And of course, very often, there *will* be consequences - there may very likely be reprisals if you challenge the system. It is a risk. But we are not *naturally* afraid of challenging authority - I think it's a mistake to believe we are naturally afraid of attracting reprisal or punishment to ourselves. The most outspoken people in the world are children. They will challenge at every step if they see something that blocks their needs. Many teenagers are like this too, but usually by that age, they have been trained out of this behaviour. They've been schooled into acquiescence. If they are still at ease with risk-taking, with challenging, they are labelled as bold, problem-makers, disruptive, anti-authoritarian, and rebels. So, in many ways, our

work is looking at how to be bold.

Bríd: This relates to our discussion on how we have internalised authority. Yet these are key learning moments, where we can uncover these hidden trends by focusing on the personal in the context of the social.

Peter: I often hear people speaking about their duty of care as facilitators. But I am *not* talking about *not* caring. A facilitator may notice and draw attention to distress in the group, but not step to solve it for the group.

Bríd: Yes, I think the role of caring is gradually emerging in education (Noddings, 2005). It is about adult relationships, however, not that of parent/child. But what do you think are the responsibilities of adult educators, if we want independent, problem-solving, active groups who take responsibility for their own learning?

Peter: The first thing is to create the condition for this mentality to prosper. For example, we should strive not to reproduce the models of authoritarian educators, that some groups may have become used to, and as a result, expect you to be. Freire speaks interestingly about this when he coined the concept of *nostalgia for origins* (1972). My understanding of this concept is that a facilitator, when challenged by a learner, can react negatively and defensively, using their body of knowledge, years of expertise, training and social status to silence the objections of the learner. They retreat to a position that they know well, from whence they came, or at least, from whence their status comes.

Bríd: We have to challenge the traditional power relations rather than reinforce the traditional or exploitative. Our practice really has developed in order to enable us to resist the imperative of that authoritative stance. So, for example, we try to learn in circles in order to reflect the *equality* of the relationship between the learners and facilitator, and methods that help people to express complex experiences in their lives, in order to maintain this resistance.

Peter: It poses a lot of questions for us, when we are working with educators here at university level and we introduce a range of adult education activities. This has happened a lot for me where I use drama methods. I often use certain creative methods to help people explore concepts such as *freedom* or

*oppression*. The methods might be a problem-solving game involving some team activity or other. After the activity or game has happened – usually no more than 4 minutes – we spend a lot of time analysing what just happened. My questions are designed to invite participants to consider how this activity, or their behaviour, is representative in any way of activities and behaviours in society. Are we exploring a concept, like *socially conferred status*, or *gender*, or *deference to authority*, for example? I then move the discussion to a point where we critically examine the concept in relation to our own lives. And I invite the group to share stories that illustrate the concept in practice. Finally, these stories have to be connected to a conversation that is about change and justice and equality and power. The stories are a way of examining these concepts in society. I have seen people – usually educators themselves – who have been really excited by these games and activities, who go away and use them with their own groups. They play the game with their learners. However, many do not connect what their learners have just done to wider society. And often the exercise is sterile, or self-referential, or too vaguely personal or abstract – it has no social context. It often doesn't work because the facilitator has not connected it into anything important in society. Nor have they used it as a way to be critically reflective about what is going on in the world around them. It's just a game, and a game is safe.

Bríd: When we think about the war against people, and the role of really useful practice, we're saying both learners and facilitators should not 'play it safe.' They should take risks.

Peter: Yes, I believe they should. They should be 'informed' risks, of course – they need to know what the consequences might be for them if they take the risk. But in order to get rid of traditional, authoritative methods of education, and to become active, independent, critical citizens who not only take responsibility for our learning but also for changing the world around us, we need to be able to *be bold*. The authoritative systems want to maintain the unchanging, patriarchal, certain, modes of learning and teaching, and it is our duty to challenge this, fundamentally. Traditional systems see the personal as the field of therapy, about fixing and shaping the person. We see the personal as a means to connect to the socio-political. To paraphrase Augusto Boal, (1998) our work is not about changing, improving, or fixing the person so that they may better fit into social systems; rather it is about changing social systems to meet the needs of the person.

## Conclusion

The issues raised in this dialogue centred on social suffering emanating from the exercise of patriarchal authority, including the oppression of young people, women, and other subordinate groups. The practice of adult educators for critical democracy entails tackling the hidden agendas that deflect attention away from the heartless exercise of power, on the one hand, such as the focus on the individual at the expense of social analysis, or the compulsion to hand over power to perceived authority on the other, from the fear of punishment, internalised authoritarianism or simply displaced power inherent in representative democracy. However, changing social systems to create a critical, participative democracy is a formidable task, yet it has to start with recognising and empathising with the extent of the suffering that people endure in their daily lives with the abuse of power, patriarchal and structural (Das and Kleinman, 2001:3).

In addition, this article revealed the potential of dialogue as reflexive research to uncover these hidden agendas. This reflexivity ranged over our motivations for work in adult community education, from community theatre to women's studies, intrinsically politicised arenas. We hope that this conversation will initiate a series of autoethnographic conversations which will build a fuller picture of the role of adult community educators in the critical democratic response to the war against people, and in creating a caring, intelligent and powerful new world.

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