The Slow Learner: Feeling our way to Thinking about Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

This article is a critique of the current formal education system as a construct for consumerism, where the value of learning is geared towards increasingly limited instrumentalist ends. It considers alternative ways of educating the population to prepare for a century of disruption and upheaval as we transition from an unsustainable fossil fuel-based economy, where competition and acquisition are lauded to a less frenetic, but ultimately more egalitarian reflective future. It argues against the short-term myopia of credentialism, determined by election cycle politics and competitive advantage, and instead posits a humanistic vision for community education and teaching innovation that takes the longue durée regard of the history of human relations into account.

Accepting Gellner's exo-socialisation model for mass education in the industrial age, it asks what will replace this in a post-industrial world. Beginning with the principles of widening participation and social inclusion as the starting points for a socially just education, it argues that relationships are central for emancipatory education to take effect. It uses two programmes offered by Maynooth University's Department of Adult and Community Education, the Communiversity and the Critical Skills modules: A Social Analysis of Everyday Life, as examples of programmes that have inclusion, equality and diversity, and social justice as core principles in their modus operandi. Here participation, dialogue, reflection, and a willingness to engage offer hope for an intergenerational lifelong learning approach to education in the twenty-first century that is 'thought led' rather than 'market driven'.

1. What is the purpose of education?

Education should not set out to diminish the person; it should not harm or cause pain, it should not reduce, belittle or demean. It should not coerce the person into doing, or causing to be done, anything that will have a negative effect upon the person, their community or their society. Yet education does these things to people all the time. As part of a capitalist

economy, it initiates us into an economic system that acts against our best interests in favour of short-term wealth and material accumulation. From an early age, it subjugates the imagination into conformity for the sake of efficiency, and stifles enquiry into other possible ways of being in the world for ever-increasing productivity (Greene, 1995). This paper will ask if the Western education model is providing students with the knowledge, skills and confidence that they need to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century (Giroux, 2022). It will consider the mission of the university as this is currently understood in a time when policy makers look askance at subjects and disciplines that are deemed impractical, esoteric and ineffective in terms of employment, opting instead to be 'market led' without referencing the fact that in Ireland at least the market has led to a banking crisis, a housing crisis, and globally to the brink of environmental disaster in the shape of the looming climate catastrophe.

An education that is solely beholden to increased productivity and enhanced income potential is an education that makes us all poorer. As the introduction to social media is established in the very earliest years of infancy (Reid Chassiakos, et al., 2016; Smyth, 2022), exposure to a consumerist discourse inflates desire and entitlement ever earlier in the child's consciousness. The collusion of a funcionalist education system that underpins a capitalist narrative of success as one of material acquisition and possession should, in the present era of environmental crisis, at least raise questions and prompt policy makers and civil servants involved in decision making around education to reflect. In Ireland 83% (80% men and 86% women) of students complete second-level education as compared with 79% on average across OECD countries (OECD, 2019). The trend of direct progression from second-level to third-level education is also above average (OECD, 2020). This has had unintended consequences to pushing people into professional employment and away from trades and services, which now face labour shortages.

In the policy paper Progressing A Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge (Government of Ireland, 2022), the Irish Department of Further and Education, Research, Innovation and Science is currently attempting to rebalance the educational landscape to meet the ongoing economic and societal demands in construction, retail, hospitality and the caring professions by diverting an increasing number of young people into Further Education and Training courses and apprenticeships (2022). Education has become equated with skills acquisition.

This paper will make a case for a fundamental restructuring of the education system away from a frontloaded jobs-oriented instrumentalist-based form of learning towards a lifelong learning, strengths-based 'capabilities approach' (Sen, 1992). The capabilities approach, first proposed in the 1980s by the economist Amartya Sen, is based on two assumptions. First, that freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance. Second, that freedom to achieve well-being must be understood in terms of people with capabilities. In other words, their real opportunities to do, and be, what they value (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). It will argue that the current education system is a hazing process whereby certain academic subjects and disciplines are apotheosised for their earning potential, while devaluing what has been a core purpose of education or at least university education up until recently, as the 'effort to make capable and cultivated human beings' (Mill, 1867, p. 4). It will also argue that the way out is through a real commitment to lifelong learning where adult and community education pedagogical practice can encourage and instil confidence in the learner, and by extension the community of learners, to face the great challenges that lie ahead over the course of the coming century.

2. Instrumentalism

In 2011, Maynooth University (MU) in Ireland set up a working group to respond to the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2011), more commonly referred to as the Hunt Report. The Hunt Report was drafted in the aftermath of the banking crisis and economic crash of 2008 in Ireland, and although it takes the 2000 White Paper Learning for Life (Government of Ireland, 2000) as its point of departure, its tone is much less

idealistic. It is redolent with the shock of the crash, the political and social repercussions of the Bank Guarantee,[1] and is determined to future-proof the Irish Higher Education system for the benefit of 'Ireland Inc.' What emerged from the Hunt Report was a greater influence for business and industry within the education sector. However, it also held out the promise of widening participation and civic engagement, two of the central platforms for Access in education. One immediate development was the Springboard initiative[2] informed by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN). Given that Ireland is a small open economy that relies heavily on its ability to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from transnational conglomerates like Facebook (Meta), Google, TikTok etc., the skills concentrated on Science Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects, conversion courses in Information Communication Technology (ICT), big data analytics, supply chain, and export sector-led courses were, and still are, given precedence. For indigenous industries, tourism and hospitality were emphasised. In the years following 2008, Ireland's economic survival was dependent upon the so-called Troika of the European Commission, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Central Bank (ECB). Severe austerity measures were imposed on the country, and lifelong learning and funded part-time programmes were directed towards Labour Market Activation (one exception to this was the Communiversity programme which is discussed later).

The discourse surrounding education and Higher Education at this time leant heavily towards the 'knowledge economy,' 'skills and employability,' 'earning potential,' 'career choice,' and the promotion of STEM above all else. This understanding still prevails, and it is little wonder, therefore, that Instrumentalism (Mezirow, 1990) is on the increase in Ireland just as it is in the UK (Duckworth & Smith, 2018). In Ireland, the EU-funded Human Capital Initiative July Stimulus 2020 pushed micro-credentials as a way to drive up the country's low participation rates in lifelong learning (Solas, 2020).[3] These are again overwhelmingly skills focussed.

The Hunt Report recommended more influence for business and industry in education. The MU Response had one overarching theme which can be summed up as: Higher Education Institutions should welcome CEOs at faculty meetings when philosophers are invited into the boardroom. The response sought to encourage the university to engage with the capitalist economy in a way that would include calculations that go beyond shareholder dividends and profit margins, to make decisions that have some element of moral and ethical considerations inbuilt. It asks that the university asserts itself as a place of thoughtful contemplation that sometimes has to be critical of the status quo, and the received wisdom that market is always correct. The risks that face us as a species threaten to overwhelm an instrumentalist educational paradigm (Duckworth & Smith, 2018) predicated on perpetual economic growth. Education in the twenty-first century must allow for thinking and reflection, for history, philosophy and politics as well as other disciplines from Arts and Humanities to be promoted in schools (Earle et al., 2017). Critical disciplines such as these move the conversation on from the applied sciences, solution focused education

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[1] The Bank Guarantee officially called The Credit Institutions (Financial Support) Act 2008 provided a €440 billion guarantee to six Irish banks to prevent possible collapse of Ireland's economy as a result of the financial crisis of 2007–2008.

[2] Springboard+ is a government initiative offering free and heavily subsidised courses at certificate, degree, and masters level leading to qualifications in areas where there are employment opportunities in the economy. These areas include ICT, engineering, green skills, manufacturing and construction, among many others. There are over 300 courses available for 2022-23, the majority of which are flexible and part-time. https://springboardcourses.ie/.

[3] SOLAS was established in 2013 under the Further Education and Training Act as an agency of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. It replaced the previous skills and training in further education agency Fás whose expenditure in the Celtic Tigre era had brought that organisation into disrepute. It also absorbed the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) as the reconfigured Education and Training Boards (ETBIs). The ETBIs emphasised their training remit above education. Currently, lifelong learning is measured by SOLAS using the EU approved Labour Force Survey (LFS) to calculate the share of adults aged 25-64 who had engaged in formal and/or nonformal learning.

- 'we have the technology so we can do it', to a deliberative, slower form of learning that asks the moral question 'But should we?' Even to ask such a question could be seen as radical in its naivety, but to make a choice not to merely go along is in some sense a political act.

3. Access

Any discussion about social justice education inevitably turns its attention to access as part of the inclusion and widening participation agenda (Boud in Osborne and Crossan, 2007). Great strides have been made in Ireland in terms of access since the first National Access Plan in 2015. However, access itself is not an unproblematic idea (Rowan, 2019). Access means different things to different people at different times of their life. For instance, access in relation to school children often assumes that it is about getting children from so called 'disadvantaged' backgrounds into Higher Education. Access for people with a whole range of disabilities means an educational psychological or medical diagnosis is referenced against some notional norm, whereby 'less than', or at least 'not the same as', is taken into account. Access for mature students is often thought of as 'second chance', to make up for something they missed out on first time around. Access within the migrant community, especially those who are caught up in the asylum process, means something akin to meeting one's basic needs. In all cases though, access is associated with 'difference'. This assumption is loaded with negative connotations indicating 'deficiency' of some sort in either the individual or the community they come from. This is an enormous barrier to the very people that access programmes are set up to engage, and in that sense, becomes exclusionary. People in the process of addiction recovery often speak about their recovery as 'an inside job'; the same sentiment applies to members of underserved and disadvantaged communities. Perhaps the language of access needs to be looked at and the lexicon of lifelong learning be embraced and

promoted (Osborne et al., 2007) as the starting point of any discussion around education. However, changing the vocabulary is not enough; to change the discourse, we also need to examine the practices of education and move towards a capabilities approach.

If access is thought about with capabilities in mind, then the demand that the university becomes more embedded and relevant in the lives of people beyond the campus walls enables us to pursue a form of democratic and emancipatory education with the population at large. A socially just education will be one that is shaped by, and responds to, the communities and individuals that participate in the conversation. The conversation will recognise the human relations embedded in every learning encounter, and the conversation will be open-ended and open to all (Rowan, 2019). These are the principles to which both the Communiversity and Critical Skills modules - A Social Analysis of Everyday Life, Reflective Practice and Experiential Learning, adhere.

4. The Communiversity and Critical Skills A Social Analysis of Everyday Life

The Communiversity is a three-way partnership established in the Republic of Ireland in 2011 between Maynooth University (MU), community-based organisations in the form Local Development Companies, and the Public Library Service. For each partner there are particular policy demands that come under the general headings of social inclusion, widening participation, community development and capacity building. It operates in underserved communities and areas designated in terms of Higher Education as being 'socially disadvantaged'. The Communiversity in Coolock[4] has been operating since 2011. I have been delivering critical skills modules in the university since 2016. My idea for Critical Skills was predicated on the understanding of the sense of bewilderment that many, if not all, new students to the university have upon entry. The most difficult thing for first year student to do in the early part of the semester is to get them to engage and open up.

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[4] Coolock is a parish in north Dublin with a high number of social housing and council housing and is considered an

area disadvantage according to the Pobal Deprivation Index.

A criticism that is often levelled at students coming straight from secondary school is that they are not prepared, or do not know how, to study at third level. There is a tendency on behalf of academics to think of students as needing to be deprogrammed. In fact, what they need is the space to decompress, to unwind and allow themselves to become themselves. Both programmes rely on dialogue, discussion and play as the basis for learning, and content is co-produced and co-created.

5. Vignette

In early March 2022 I held a Critical Skills class for first year undergraduates, and a Critical Thinking workshop as part of the Coolock Communiversity on the same day. This is a composite reflection of what happened in both groups. To start both classes, I asked the participants to write a haiku:

A what?
A haiku, a traditional Japanese poem.
I can't write poetry.
No way, I couldn't write poetry.
A poem not a chance.
What's it called?
A haiku.
What is it?
A poem of 17 syllables. 5 then 7 then 5. You can write about the weather, nature, the seasons, how you are feeling, whatever.
I couldn't write a poem.
Who says so?
I was no use at writing in school.
This isn't school. I'll give you 10 minutes to write it and see how you get on.
It won't be any good.
Let us be the judge of that.
[I set the timer and the clock ticks by. The look of pain on peoples' faces].
Nearly there, two minutes and then you will get a chance to read them out to the rest of the group.
What?!!
Ah here, I didn't sign up for this.
Ok, who wants to go first?
[Silence].
I'll go. It's not very good though.
Why do you say that? We haven't heard it yet, let us be the judge.

[The poem is beautiful, and everybody claps spontaneously. The girl is beaming]. Can we hear it again? And again, one more time. Everyone agrees that was really lovely. Who's next? I'll go to get it out of the way.
[Again, everyone is enthralled.] Great stuff let's hear it again.

I only managed to write two lines.
We'll have a go then at adding the last line. And we did and she was happy.
Who wants to go next?
I didn't get it. I did it wrong.
Did you write something?
Yes.
Ok, can we hear it?

   I don't know how to
   Write a poem that is like this,
   This is not very good.

Everyone clapped. I said there are too many syllables in the last line (ignoring the rest, form, like all rules, is there to be broken). The look on her face was heart-breaking. Then a classmate said 'Take out 'not.'' She said it again:

   I don't know how to
   Write a poem that is like this
   This is very good.

Cheers, claps, smiles and laughter all around.

The question that the exercise provoked for me from both groups, differentiated only by the age profile and the locations of the two classes (one on campus and one in a library), is 'What has our education system done to us that makes us feel like we have failed before we have even started?' The language of 'I can't' or 'I wasn't any good' translates into 'not good enough so why bother'. This feeling of inadequacy can follow us for the rest of our lives. Here is the locus of dis-engagement from education, and the manqué of access policies. The recognition that feeling, learning, and thinking are part of the same process (Bion, 1967) can liberate us from the tyranny of the past failures and the damning effects of memory. Connecting with 'emotional energy' as Mullineaux puts it 'the integration of feeling with thinking – [is] a vital component in the learning

process' (2008, p. 90). Kincheloe argues, that we need to be able to create alternative educations 'grounded on a critical theoretical commitment to social justice, anti-oppressive ways of being, and new forms of connectedness and radical love' (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 6). This is where social justice education can act as an antidote to the limiting structures and processes of knowledge transfer and skills acquisition.

Shortly after these classes I met an academic from a university in the Czech Republic who spoke rather despairingly about the current state of education: 'The young people nowadays don't study, they don't go to the library and get a book out, they don't remember anything, they just go to their phones and look it up. And they don't think, they feel.' He's not wrong. I replied that 'feelings come first, it's feelings that determine behaviour'. Traditionally, universities as places of rational discourse, scientific endeavour, and evidence- based research don't do feelings very well; however not recognising the fact that human beings are to a great extent driven by our unconscious desires and primal emotions misses a crucial element in the learning process.

Ivan Illich, in his famous work *De-schooling Society* (1970), can be accused of being unrealistically dismissive of the established education system. However, the idea that institutionalised 'education', and the universal application of it across the globe is an unquestioning good must, for any critical thinker, be questioned. There are benefits to education, but if the sole purpose is to reproduce a workforce for an economic system that relies on reproducing repressive regimes of thought and suppressing emotions, with the purpose of perpetual economic growth, then this is not good. If the purpose of education in the twentieth century was to educate idiots (in the classical Athenian sense of individuals who disconnected from the polis/community) with profit as their main motivation, then we have to ask what is the purpose of education in the twenty first century? Gellner (1983) suggests that mass education, or exo-socialisation in the modern industrial nation state, is the vehicle for cultural transmission and individual identity made manifest in the nation state. That being the case, then, it is to be expected that the dominant economic philosophy of the state administration will prevail. However, when

the industrial base of modern society – that of 'high-powered technology and the expectancy of sustained growth' (p.33) – is called into question, then the education system that it supports must also be held up for examination. It has become apparent that recognising our inter-dependence and relationships with all kinds of people and the environment must take precedence. This means educating people to expect less in terms of material possessions, and to recognise our duties to each other as a species and to our planet as custodians for future generations (Ryan, 2009). In order to do this, according to Burns, we must begin 'a process of unlearning our unsustainability and relearning our entanglement with the world' (2018, p. 278). In a social justice model of education, environmental education (Mullineaux, 2008), alongside the critical disciplines from the Arts and Social Sciences, would be given room on the curriculum and valued as much as any of the disciplines with high earning potential. In fact, this very discourse of education and earnings must be reflected on and held up to scrutiny.

The design of our current education system is to establish and solidify boundaries in early years through a more abstract form of learning than that of the pure experiential type that all humans experience when they come into the world. It sets up the type of learning that is about content acquisition, and the beginning of a selection process based on a set of values determined by economic forces. A feedback loop is established that starts to rank knowledge by its added value to the economy with maths and science at the apex.

The shift in emphasis for the learner from one of relationships to one of control and selection becomes internalised in school. The natural inclination for the child is to be a philosopher, a seeker and an explorer. Early life is all about taking risks, crawling, probing, reaching, tasting. These philosophers/explorers are slowly gelded (Gellner, 1983, p.36) from climbing, skipping, tumbling and falling animated beings, into clerks, by denying their bodies in the restraining environment of the classroom into sedentary receptacles of second-hand knowledge (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, through what Skinner termed operant conditioning (1974), the child's behaviour is modified through a series of rewards and

punishments which bestow a sense of achievement or failure. Punishment has shifted from the body to the mind. Behaviour modification takes place in response to the 'aversive stimuli' (Skinner, 1974) of competitive learning, with the inevitable winners and losers being drawn into the learning experience. Hence the environment for self-imposed exclusion is introduced as the loser gets 'knocked out' early and often from the competition. Feelings of shame and inadequacy then become associated with learning. Skinner would go further to say that '…behaviour does not change because [the student] feels anxious; it changes because of the aversive contingencies which generate the condition felt as anxiety. The change in feeling and the change in behaviour have a common cause' (1974, p. 68).

Where disenchantment leads, disengagement follows. I have observed the Maths Wall of Fame in second class in a primary school where the same five or six children made it onto the gallery every week, just rotating their positions. Pupils who try their best, but who don't achieve the honour roll, give up and disengage from the subject at a relatively young age. In conversation with a colleague who delivers the maths component of the Froebel teacher Training in Maynooth University, such unintended undermining is commonplace in maths games and exercises where he described 'speed in answering the question correctly is all that matters.' Speed and conformity these are the hallmarks of success in a stifling system of education (Ross in Rancière, 1991, p. xx). My colleague sees this as a failure on the part of the teaching profession as the knockout nature of these games excludes the slower learner from the subject before they ever get a chance to become familiar with it. Opting out of something that brings no reward, but rather compounds a sense of repeated failure and its accompanying shame, seems very wise. Shame demotivates the learner and distorts 'normal' development. Coping strategies such as hiding, avoiding and deflecting become associated with learning thus creating a minus-Valency (Hafsi, 2005) where education is repulsed.

Repairing this relationship is part of the transformative process (Mezirow, 1990; 1991; 2000; Mezirow et al., 2009) that adults experience when they re-engage with education in later life.

Unfortunately, due to the instrumentalist nature of government policies towards lifelong learning, this aspect of learning is for the most part ignored when it comes to funding, unless it is specifically targeted at marginalised groups such as people in recovery from drug addiction or mental health conditions. If it was to be recognised as applying to the general population, it holds out great potential to move beyond instrumentalism.

The fault does not necessarily lie in the individual teacher, nor in the profession of teaching, but rather in the structures of education and the simplistic goal to serve the economy. To reorient education into a sustainable humanistic model requires some deliberation about the job specification of the teacher in the twenty first century, and the nature of teaching at different life stages. Reconfiguring the teaching profession and the culture of education is not beyond our ken. It starts with looking critically at how we relate to each other as human beings, and what it is we want to do, to employ our social imagination as Greene puts it (1995) for the cause of a more socially just form of education. The acquisition of knowledge arising from the banking method of teaching (Freire, 1970) facilitates socio-economic, cultural selection through a series of tests and exams that merely reinforces the competitive aspect of learning. Competition for high points, good grades for elite courses, medicine, veterinary, IT, Business and Economics ensure that intellectual hegemony is maintained, and the class consensus for individual ownership and wealth accumulation is reproduced. What gets lost is 'the process of becoming one's self' which Charles, interpreting Winnicott and Bion, says, 'is much more important than 'receiving' knowledge (2004, p.15). To 'know thyself', and consequently understand the decisions and actions that we take, surely is the ultimate goal of education. To know thyself is central to Sen's Capabilities Approach (Conlin, 2019), just as it is for Critical Skills – A Social Analysis of Everyday Life and the Communiversity.

6. Capabilities and critical thinking

Capabilities is understood as 'alternative things a person can do or be' (Yaqub, 2009, p.437). As Naz (2020, p.316) points out:

Sen expanded the notion of human well-being beyond consumption and developed better measures of poverty and inequality. He has introduced a different view of human economic agents having some intrinsic worth rather than being just rational utility maximisers. His notion of well-being also encompasses development of human potential by increasing the options available to individuals in any society. Sen asserted that when making normative evaluations about a *valuable life*, the focus should be on what people are *able to be* and *to do*, and not just on the material resources that they are able to consume.

Education using capabilities, then, is a strengths-based approach, and is seen as the vehicle and process by which the individual can achieve this desired outcome. It critiques the current Western model of education for establishing 'acquisition and competition' instead of 'cooperation and sharing' as core to its mission. Curiously, every year since I began teaching Critical Skills - A Social Analysis of Everyday Life, I have asked students to consider the notion of 'success'. Overwhelmingly fairness, justice, rights to a dignified life, and respect come out as the most common answers. Idealism is, perhaps, to be expected at the age of these students in their late teens, but it is a virtue that can be too easily dismissed. These ideals are also emerge in the discussions that take place in the Communiversity amongst older students.

This objective of the Communiversity remains to engage people who regard Higher Education as distant, alien and unobtainable, in a university level course in a secure, familiar and local environment for individual personal development, and capacity building at a community level. As mentioned above, the idea for the Communiversity developed out of necessity brought on by the economic crash of 2008. The conditions that prevailed in Ireland in the first number of years of the programme were those of severe austerity. The section of society hardest hit were the so-called areas of disadvantage where those in which the services of Local Development Companies (LDC) were most heavily relied on. LDCs implement community development programmes on behalf of the State for social inclusion, education and employment schemes. The Communiversity was an attempt to continue with the educational and community development work that the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) in Maynooth University had been involved with for nearly forty years up to that point. What made the Communiversity different at that time, and still to this day, is that it runs counter to the labour market activation skills acquisition instrumentalism, and encourages dialogue, participation, curiosity and reflection (Barter & Hyland, 2020).

Partnership and outreach are the two cornerstones of this initiative. As publicly funded bodies, each partner has a responsibility to implement government policy in the areas of their expertise. The Public Library service seeks, in Our Public Libraries 2022 Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities (Government of Ireland, 2018), closer involvement with the local population. For the community-based partners, the strategic goals determined by the EU funded Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) – especially Goal 2 for supporting individuals to engage with lifelong learning – are increasingly informed by more frequent contact between local community adult education co-ordinators and the university. So partnership is crucial, and the value of sharing public services where policy outcomes converge is an excellent example of joined up thinking. In purely economic terms this adds value to each of the partner's output and productivity at low cost.

More importantly, however, the Communiversity is about connecting people in a learning environment where social, economic and political phenomena that affect their lives can, with the help of adult education facilitators and academics, be debated and discussed in a meaningful way. It can act as an access gateway, or pre-access programme, for people to enter Further and Higher Education if they wish. For many participants it may be the first point of contact with Higher Education, or even the concept of lifelong learning. In terms of widening participation (Barter and Hyland, 2020), the internal psychological and emotional barriers to

access that have been outlined above present the first, and perhaps most intransigent, stumbling blocks that need to be overcome.

An advantage that the Communiversity has over other learning initiatives is that it is not accredited. This freedom from credentials means that people can use it for non-instrumental reasons, as a meeting place, a place to make friends, a place to talk about complicated issues that are normally the reserve of 'important people' on the television, or on other forms of media. It takes everyday issues and presents the work of the academy in a way that is relevant to the lives of the participants in an environment where people are treated as equals and with respect.

One of the most positive outcomes from the Communiversity has been the establishment of the Communiversity Network (CN). This is a loose affiliation of community-based adult guidance counsellors, adult and community education co-ordinators, lifelong learning officers, and local employment staff who work for LEADER Partnership Companies, Local Development Companies and Local Employment Offices across Ireland. All of the members are committed to social inclusion, some working directly on the SICAP, while others seek to move individuals into education, training or employment or as part of an individualised learning/care plan. In 2021 the CN submitted a document to the consultation process of the National Access Plan 2022-2028 called 'Access All Areas' (Author et al, 2021). Its starting point is a quote from Theodore Zeldin which has become the guiding principle of the Communiversity '…there is room for a new sort of university that is not a ghetto for the young, but a place where all generations can exchange experience, culture and hope' (Zeldin, 2012, p. 31).

Education for the twenty-first century must involve the notion of living with uncertainty and insecurity. Recognising and analysing these unstable states of being is the surest form of dealing with them and giving any hope of overcoming the external forces of lack, scarcity and reduction that can mean liberation.

The key to creating this kind of education is to take it out of strictly dedicated educational institutions, schools, colleges and universities, and bring it back to into the community where it ripples out through webs of relationships (Watts in Carlson & Maniacci, 2011) to be animated in everyday life. Partnership with likeminded organisations such as libraries and community development companies can achieve much more than the mere conferring on a qualification. As one member of the Communiversity Network put it:

Lifelong learning opportunities like Maynooth University's Communiversity foster a culture of learning which has far reaching benefits for the wider community. Subjects usually associated exclusively with third level institutions, such as psychology, philosophy, and economics, are explored in a more informal environment such as the local library. Such initiatives help to demystify third level education and help to break down the barriers of esoteric terminology and formalised assessment. The programme…has far reaching implications; concepts conventionally associated with higher learning are discussed and shared and with family and friends. Similar initiatives for younger demographics (e.g. secondary schools and youth services) would help to further demystify third level education. We find there is great community interest but a lack of funding for such initiatives (Antoinette Patton CN).

In Ireland we have an opportunity that is made explicit in the National Access Plan submission for a culture of real lifelong learning to be established from the clichéd 'cradle to the grave'. The way that second level education in Ireland is structured with a transition year break from solely academic subjects between the Junior Cycle (GCSE) and the Leaving Certificate exit exam, gives some space for teenagers to explore their options in a structured way between employment, volunteering, and exposure to university subjects through the Communiversity - which would include Critical Skills[5] (Barter, et al., 2021).

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[5] A pilot ComMUniversiTY is being delivered in 2022-2023 in Pobalscoil Neasain on Dublin's Northside for Transition Year students. Modules will include Anthropology,

Philosophy/Critical Skills and Psychology with one off contributions from Disability Studies, Cultural Heritage

7. Conclusion: Hope in unexpected places

Established elites maintain their position by controlling the discourses of possible ways of being, reproducing aspiring generations with the promise of social mobility, and the rewards of wealth and status that follow. Education is a powerful tool in perpetuating hegemony (Bourdieu, 1992). Dismantling the structures that reinforce such a 'natural' and tried and tested process of teaching and learning will be a difficult task, but with what lies ahead it is one worth attempting. Disrupting longtime tried and tested ways of doing things might sometimes be called for to bring about change in the culture of education. For instance, the demographics of the teaching profession in Ireland are overwhelmingly single, white, middle-class females coming straight from second-level school (Keane & Heinz, 2015; Heinz & Keane, 2018). In other professions, such an inexperienced and limited set of life experiences would been seen as a negative. Opening the profession up to people with more experience, and in locations that are not designed to stifle but to excite and innovate, holds out to possibility of making the bond of human relationships central to the learning activity. Group teaching and co-facilitation could be considered. Employing parents to support teachers in the classroom, especially in early years, could recreate the 'village' or community environment of teaching. It could also obviate some of the more traumatic episodes of separation anxiety that everyone who, as a child or with a child who, has cried at the school gate can relate to. Such an initiative is not set out to undermine the teaching profession, but to make use of the natural resources, experience and expertise of parents who are the primary educators through socialisation in the home. Encouraging parents themselves to become teachers should not be beyond the scope of possibility.[6]

Adult education is often praised for the transformational impact it has on a student's life. It can prompt rediscovery, rebirth, and changing perspective to make new meanings out of long-held assumptions and patterns of behaviour (Mezirow, 1990). If we can reimagine education as a process over the life span, and not a series of hurdles in the shape of skills acquisition for credentials, then freedom awaits. This will not be easy as both the individual learner and the institutions have a history of understanding what education has been up to now. Exo-socialisation for industrial society as Gellner called it (1983, p. 38) will not work for the post-industrial world that is needed for our species survival. We will have to reimagine ourselves as lifelong learners, and Higher Education Institutions and, schools, will have to re imagine themselves as places that are woven into our culture as communities of equals, where we are all engaged in varying pursuits that are part of the same conversation.

Hope can be found in unexpected places, though, and the emergency of the pandemic provided some evidence that the whole education system – from government departments to schools and universities – can do things differently (Barter and Grummell, 2021). When faced with the reality that the usual way of working, (i.e. competition through the sorting mechanism of high points in exams for course entry), could not work, then we were free to think differently and to use our 'social imagination'. The space to do this was created out of necessity, and 'care' became a concern for educational institutions and professions. We need to do it again in the face of advances in Artificial Intelligence, just as our colleague from the Czech Republic pointed out and the climate crisis. It is time to remind ourselves of just what the primary task of education is: to understand and communicate, and hopefully bring about, a socially just form of

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(including Archaeology) and Criminology. An evaluation will be carried out at the end of the programme.

[6] One of the aims of the Turn to Teaching project was originally designed to bring adult students including parents into Initial Teacher Training in their local

communities with the support of the Community organisation involved in the Communiversity. This element of the initiative did not work out as originally planned, but the potential for such an intervention is still there.

education that is 'relationship-centred' (Rowan, 2019, p.15) for all our sakes.

8. Disclosure statement

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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