



## Facing the challenges of creating online critical dialogical spaces for community learning pathways into HE.

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# **Facing the challenges of creating online critical dialogical spaces for community learning pathways into HE.**

## **Abstract**

*COVID-19 and the looming economic recession threatens adult educators long-fought battle to create dialogical spaces for transformatory learning. Previous experience of designing and delivering community programmes to marginalised, non-traditional students, has taught us the necessity of building strong tutor-student and student-peer relationships. This paper maps the trajectory of a creative educational outreach response to reconfigure into an online platform. We reflect on the challenges and opportunities presented to us as adult educators, as well as those presented to the adult learners with whom we engaged.*

**Keywords:** Online learning, educational disadvantage, community education

## ***Introduction***

The move to online learning, due to the current global pandemic, places radical adult education in Northern Ireland in a more precarious situation than ever, demanding innovative responses to engaging in transformatory learning. In recent years, funding for adult education across Europe, Ireland and the UK has prioritized an employability skills-based agenda (Murray et al., 2014; Fitzsimons, 2017). Whilst providing education and training that up-skills and or re-skills adults for the labour market is an entirely legitimate and useful outcome of adult learning, especially given the current economic climate, this limited focus does little to promote the wider benefits of adult education, including increasing participation in social and political activities and the creation of learning communities, to tackle major social challenges (UNESCO, 2016; Learning and Work Institute, 2017; AONTAS, 2011).

Freire (1970) warned of the dangers of instrumentalising education, particularly regarding the standardization of curriculum. As adult educators, committed to transformatory practice, we set ourselves the challenge of delivering radical community education practice in an online forum. We must also recognise our privileged positions as university lecturers, whereby we have the academic freedom to design our own curriculum. The obvious danger here is that viewing ourselves as ‘experts’ we still decide what students should learn (Freire, 1998). Foucault’s (1998) understanding of power reminds us that power is everywhere and that whilst

challenging injustice in the education system, we must take cognizance of our own place within that system. There is a need for educators to engage in what Pillow (2003, p.188) refers to as 'uncomfortable reflexivity', to be prepared to question our practice and the structures of the institution in which we operate. As educators and activists in the field of community development, reflective practice is a core value and key area of work (ESB, 2015; AIEB, 2016). Freire's pedagogy highlights the importance of history as a lived experience and the importance of people telling their stories in order to name their oppression (Darder, 2014). It is only through naming the oppression in a collective setting, that people begin to question the individual and community pathological explanations, which they have absorbed without questioning. Ledwith (2020, p.99) argues that '...the use of story [is] at the core of the deeply personal and the profoundly political'. The act of telling one's story and being listened to with respect is a liberatory and transformative experience that leads to empowerment. As Guajardo et al. (2016, p.27) assert, this approach to learning:

...gives participants a new language, a different way of looking at the world, and a network of support that expands their community of practice...this reframing of our daily conditions from deficits to assets helps build hope and possibilities.

Aware that the COVID-19 restrictions presented huge challenges to our usual community outreach, our key challenge of configuring our community education programme into an online format was to empower individuals to build their collective story of structural inequality and injustice, that leads to empowerment.

### ***Education in a neoliberal landscape***

Four decades ago, election victories for Thatcher in the UK, and Reagan in the US, and a national economic experiment in Augusto Pinochet's Chile heralded a new social and economic order – one that: cemented and turbo-charged the advance of global capitalism (Bloom, 2017); and reordered the socio-economic world via a strident emphasis on free market primacy, individual responsibility, and a reconfigured role of the state (Harvey, 2005). The dominance and wide-spread adoption of neoliberalism across much of the globe in the last 40 years has: transformed the core function of states from guardians of human well-being to facilitators of global capital (Stiglitz, 2019); and encouraged states to view citizens as individual entrepreneurs, and state institutions as mechanisms for their reproduction (Davis and Bansel, 2007).

In the UK, Ireland and beyond, the education sector has been fundamentally transformed by this restructuring. Robertson (2007, p.2) for example, claims such shifts have “altered the conditions for knowledge production” and that “schools and universities are now ... mandated to create the new breed of entrepreneurs and innovators”. Further afield, Savage’s (2017, p.144) Australian study highlights the “quasi-marketisation of public schooling systems” where schools are encouraged to adopt private sector principles and market-based practices; and the “economisation of the curriculum” where the “utility” of learning is assessed in terms of preparing schoolchildren for the knowledge economy (ibid.).

In terms of understanding, and engendering socio-political resistance to these reconfigurations in education, it is important for both educators and learners to first understand the impact of neoliberalism on the dynamic between the state, private enterprise, and the citizenry. Neoliberal states singularly prioritise the needs of the private sector and frame their social and economic policies to best suit the interests of private enterprise (Bloom, 2017). At the same time, public institutions such as schools and hospitals become increasingly viewed by the state as just another part of the market (Harvey, 2010); and education policies are framed around the view that, ‘there is nothing distinctive or special about education or health; they are services and products like any other, to be traded in the marketplace’ (Peters, 1999 cited in Davis and Bansel, 2007, p.257). As Michel Foucault (2008, p.215 cited in ibid.) whose theories, perhaps better than anyone, explained the complex relationship between power, knowledge, social control and social institutions, has argued, a key aspect of neoliberalism is the relentless commodification of “domains previously considered to be non- economic”.

There are, unsurprisingly, pedagogical and social justice consequences of neoliberalism’s influence over education, which are completely counter to Freirian (2010) notions of collaborative learning and emancipatory praxis, and Gramsci’s (1971) conceptualisation of ‘Organic Intellectuals’. Viewed through these prisms of resistance, neoliberalism’s ‘quasi-marketisation’ and curricula ‘economisation’ of the education sector (Savage, 2017) engenders a pedagogical approach mandated to serve the needs of capital (in terms of producing a globally competitive workforce). Tett and Hamilton (2020) argue that this mandate: encourages and prioritises individual achievement and competition; dissuades collaboration between learners and between educators; and that business principles (e.g. efficiency and profit) are prioritised over important social justice and pedagogical values (e.g. equality, diversity and social responsibility). Similarly, in the south of Ireland, the end of Celtic tiger has resulted in a

neoliberal driven agenda that focuses on regimes of performativity that are characteristic of the marketisation of education. This agenda further compounds the problem of limited access to Higher Education for those marginalised in society (Holland et al., 2016).

Alongside these changes, education policies in the UK and Ireland in recent years have also embraced the neoliberal imperative of individual responsibility by prioritising parental choice (Gallagher, 2019). However, such a policy focus has long been understood as favouring middle class families who can deploy their social, economic and cultural capital to ensure access to the best schools, that their child is educated alongside a cohort of likely high-achievers, and is thus likely to attain HE entry qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). Conversely, poorer children are denied such access and are instead forced to attend underperforming schools in cohorts of likely low achievers and confront a substantial reduced prospect of HE opportunities (Thompson and Ivinson, 2020). This is particularly the case in Northern Ireland where the primary to post-primary transfer system is structured around academic selection – the categorisation of year 8 pupils into grammar (selective) and non-grammar schools (non-selective) according to their performance in a transfer test in year 7. Previous studies, e.g. Gallagher and Smith (2000) and Leitch et al. (2017), have highlighted that this system significantly favours middle class families who, invariably, know the value of education, have a family tradition of academic success, and have the financial means to pay for private tuition around subject specialisms and test preparation. Moreover, these same studies also show that academic selection has a long-term and debilitating impact on those who either fail or do not sit the transfer test.

The unfavourable policy context described above is a challenging one for those committed to transforming the educational landscape by encouraging learning in disadvantaged communities and widening access to HE. Of course, transforming this landscape also requires an understanding of the well-established nexus between poverty and low attainment, and subsequent low levels of participation in HE among poorer families. Previous studies have shown that: children growing up in poorer families routinely emerge from school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007); these educational deficits emerge early in children's lives, even before entry into school, and widen throughout childhood (McNally and Blanden, 2006); and that poorer children have less

parental encouragement and support and are more likely to live in a home which is not conducive to their learning (Leitch et al., 2017).

In the context of Northern Ireland, these findings are reinforced by attainment indices which highlight a significant social class attainment gap – as indicated by two important proxies: whether a child attends a grammar or non-grammar school, and free school meal entitlement (FSME). The latest data from the NI Dept. for Education (DENI, 2020) show that: grammar school attendance remains a very strong predictor of attainment (as measured by the five GCSEs matrix); pupils entitled to FSM in both grammar and non-grammar schools have lower attainment than non-FSM pupils; and, in terms of differentiation, the gap between the most affluent (i.e. non-FSM grammar school pupils) and the poorest (i.e. non-grammar school FSM pupils) there is a gap of some 55 percentage points.

Further class-based differentials are evident in the latest data on HE participation rates (UCAS, 2019), which show a significant under-representation of the poorest children in HE. The data here illustrates that, across NI, the combined participation rate of young people from communities in the lowest Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) decile is of the order of 5%. An equitable proportion would be of the order of 10%. In other words, young people in this socio-economic category are probably both unqualified and uninspired to participate in HE. To compound this problem, it is also the case that non-continuation rates (drop-out rates) for those Decile One young people who do go on to university are significantly higher than average (ibid). In terms of trying to explain these class-based attainment and HE participation differentials in a Northern Ireland context, Leitch et al. (2017) also highlighted fatalistic attitudes and negative community norms around education in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods – where many young people view school learning as pointless and hold out little hope of ever securing decent employment or advancing to HE.

The social reproduction of educational disadvantage (and privilege) is hardly new, and few sociologists have increased our understanding of this issue more than Pierre Bourdieu. For example, the negative community norms which dissuade young people (and adults) from engaging / re-engaging in education (Willis, 1977) highlight the heuristic value of the work of Bourdieu's (1990) conceptualisations of: Capitals - the social, cultural and symbolic 'assets' at an individual's disposal; Field - the social arenas within which individuals deploy such 'assets'; and Habitus - the subjective dispositions of individuals. As Bourdieu argues: individuals

routinely adapt their habitus by including and accepting dominant norms to enable profitable engagement in the 'field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992); and that habitus is a key factor in social reproduction processes because one of the field's most important effects on habitus is to limit the variation between an individual's actions and the constraining norms of their own social group (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, in a community with low levels of academic attainment and high levels of joblessness, it is likely that the affected habitus of local young people will persuade some to view 3<sup>rd</sup> level education as unattainable, and minimum-wage work, precarious zero-hour contracts or unemployment as inevitable. In such ways, their "affected habitus dictates to them what is considered achievable and worth aspiring to" (Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010, p51).

Similarly, Bourdieu's heuristics can help us understand how class privilege is socially reproduced in the context of Northern Ireland's retention of Academic Selection in the primary to post-primary transfer process. Because the current system favours families with a tradition of academic success and the financial means to pay for private tuition, we can argue that the 'Field', in this case the Northern Ireland education system, is structured in a fashion which best suits the habitus of middle-class families. In such ways, and in both examples, educational class disadvantage and privilege are simply reinforced and reproduced (Leitch et al., 2017).

Moreover, previous studies have highlighted the social consequences of low attainment and low levels of HE participation within the most disadvantaged communities. For example, Collins et al. (2015) highlight the negative impact on a young person's earning potential and social mobility – likely to be made yet worse by the post-COVID employment landscape, which is forecasted to be a challenging one for jobs in the low-skill labour market (Deloitte, 2020). Similarly, McNally and Blanden (2006) posit a long-lasting and negative impact of educational failure on the self-esteem and self-confidence of young people; while Moreland and Cownie's (2019) study shows that this impact is often carried through into adulthood – leaving some with a lifelong sense of personal failure – which makes it more difficult for them to properly support their own children's education. In other words, the issue of low attainment and low levels of HE participation really matters at familial and community levels because they deprive disadvantaged families and communities of positive (education) role models (Henderson et al., 2020), perpetuate intergenerational cycles of educational failure, and encourage the idea that educational success and access to HE is the preserve of but certain sections of the social structure (Howieson and Iannelli, 2008; Hillman and Robinson, 2016).

Arguably, one of the most insidious aspects of neoliberalist hegemony in education is the normalisation of educational inequality – where working class people come to internalise their relegated status in the educational hierarchy and consequently accept that as they do not have the required ‘capitals’ (e.g. positive community norms around education, a family tradition of educational success, and the means to pay for private tuition) to enable a successful outcome in the ‘field’ of education, they simply feel compelled to vacate the ‘field’ to those who do. Moreover, because of neo-liberalism’s hegemonic influence over pedagogical approaches, the media and the wider socio-political society, working class people come to accept that: the continued dominance of neoliberalism (and all that that means for their own life chances) is inevitable and unstoppable; and that because they feel fatalistic about their employment prospects, conclude that there is little point in them engaging or re-engaging in formal education. Of course, exceptions to the rule of success do occasionally occur and are given ‘star status’ which is used to justify keeping the traditional meritocratic system in place.

In a recent study, Moreland and Cownie (2019) highlight the value of community-based HE access programmes which recognise how difficult it is for adult returners to re-engage and alleviate their anxiety by allowing them to re-engage on their own terms, within their own communities, alongside other local students who they invariably already know. Moreover, the learning and pedagogical approach is reflective, dialectical, based on the students’ own lived experience, and underpinned by a commitment to critical thinking and social justice. Such programmes are a crucial first step towards transformative education and the development of counter-narratives to neoliberalist hegemony. Indeed, as O’Sullivan (2003, pp.328-329) argues, transformative education engenders: “a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world”; and that this shift illuminates “our understanding of ... our self-locations, our relationships with other humans and ... our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender”.

The equally crucial second step towards transformatory praxis is to encourage these returning adult learners to fully engage in critical discourses, recognise and question forms of power previously taken for granted, situate their own learning goals in their own lived experience, value the learning of that lived experience, and collectively (with their working-class neighbours and fellow learners) create new counter narratives and a new spirit of working-class resistance to neoliberal hegemony.



Foucault (2008) makes clear the awesome power neoliberalism has over all aspects of the social and political world - including education. However, he also reminds us that “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault, 1998: 95). Freire (1970), whose central thesis is education as resistance, helps us understand that only in critical dialogical spaces can meaningful critical discourse – the recognition and questioning of power – truly take place; and Foucault (1998 cited in Tett and Hamilton, 2020, p.101) helps us understand the ways in which critical discourse “undermines [power] ... renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart”.

### *A Radical Response*

Tackling educational under-achievement is a key government priority throughout the United Kingdom. The focus is however predominantly on those under 25 years. Little attention is paid to creating opportunities for older adults to re-engage with education. Yet these are often the parents whose attitudes towards learning and education impact on the next generation. Universities and colleges also have a remit with regard to Widening Access to Third Level education and increasing participation from under-represented groups. We contend that if Third Level institutions are serious about this, they need to bring education out to the communities they seek to serve and create the pathways which can genuinely open access for marginalised groups. Simply opening the doors and inviting people in is not enough!

In 2015, as a response to tackling educational disadvantage, the team designed the Unblocking Potential (UP), funded through Ulster University’s Centre for Flexible Education and delivered in local community centres. This course enables students to gain an understanding of their own personal as well as the structural barriers to learning, especially within a formal setting. This process of ‘conscientisation’ (Freire, 1970) enables participants to recognise inequalities in society as the predominant source of educational disadvantage and helps them to question the internalisation of dominant ideology, which holds individuals responsible for their failure in the education system. As opposed to the competitive model of formal education, the course encourages collaborative learning, whereby tutors and learners are all on a journey and learning from each other are enriched by all. Recognising and valuing participants’ informal learning, it seeks to develop self-confidence and self-esteem; to raise aspirations and to equip participants with the skills to study at a higher level. At the heart of this programme is an attempt to demystify education, to lift the burden of failure which many participants have carried throughout their lives and to affirm their capacity to learn. In order to do this, participants needed to overcome the significant challenge of: naming their oppression and in

sharing this with others on the programme, rejecting the label of ‘failure’ which had been imposed upon them as children; and recognising the inequalities in the education system and wider society, which had relegated them to lives of poverty. Previous research carried out with participants highlighted the extent to which this programme acted as a catalyst for their personal empowerment, with one student currently on the BSc Hons Community Development stating

The community [UP] course changed everything for me...made me see that I wasn't stupid...and could even think about applying to university (Moreland & Cownie, 2019, p.70).

A recent report by the External Examiner of the programme commented:

I am very impressed with the Unblocking Potential programme, which is groundbreaking work in addressing the widening participation agenda, particularly given that this was now embarking on an online delivery (External Examiner, 2020).

A key question that emerged for the team was how to retain a Freirean model of education, in the face of an enforced online teaching and learning methodology.

### ***Dichotomy of Real and Virtual Learning Spaces: The Educators' Perspective***

Freire (1993) claims that regardless of how, when or where education takes place, it is always a political act; it can be never neutral, but rather leads to 'liberation' or 'domestication' (Freire, 1970). As tutors committed to encouraging dialogical learning, which promotes consciousness-raising, we engaged in problem-posing dialogue with each other and with the students, around designing an online learning environment which could continue to support our values as adult educators. Darder (2014, p.9) argues that Freire (1993) '...called upon educators to engage students in a critical understanding of *the world* in order to consider emancipatory possibilities, born from the lived histories and material conditions that shaped their daily lives'. We contend that as adult educators committed to social justice, we are compelled to seek out those whose experience of formal education has led them into the 'culture of silence', where they passively accept the structural inequalities in society, which relegates them '...to become simply reliable workers, complacent citizens and avid consumers...' (ibid.) and to offer instead a pedagogy of love and hope (Freire, 1993).

Whilst a Freirian pedagogy has always been at the centre of our educational provision (Hawthorne-Steele et al., 2015; Moreland & Cownie, 2019; Hawthorne-Steele and Moreland, 2013, 2012, 2008; Hawthorne-Steele, 2011; Moreland, 2009, 2008, 2007), the COVID-19 crisis brought new challenges to the design and delivery of our teaching. Recognising that most of our students are adult returners, from disadvantaged backgrounds, we were keenly aware that many would have restricted access to the Internet; have limited or inadequate access to computers or laptops; and that many would be extremely challenged in using the technology. The emergence of new technologies has excluded and disempowered the poor (Ragnedda, 2017), since they are unable to afford the necessary equipment to access the online platforms. In order to bridge the gap in the digital divide, we adopted what Ragnedda (ibid., p.262) terms as ‘a regulating role to protect and include those who are being left behind’. Attempting to adapt to a new way of working, up-skilling ourselves with online teaching, whilst reassuring students of our continued support and availability placed huge burden on university staff. The university’s approach of ‘business as usual’ meant an almost overnight turnaround in business practices, including the delivery of all teaching and learning support to online platforms. The anxiety that is a prominent feature in our virtual discourses around providing creative teaching, is summed up in the concern that we do not reproduce a ‘banking system’ where we become ‘...authoritarian on one hand or excessively permissive and unfocused on the other’ (Darder, 2012, p.112). We need to strike a balance and look for new ways to engage students in the online shared learning environment.

As we grasped the nettle of online teaching on our undergraduate programmes, we were also faced with the question of how we would pursue our aim of providing a gateway to HE for people in local communities who want to re-engage with education. How could we support students returning to formal education to feel a sense of belonging and security, whilst remaining true to our ethos of transformative learning? How would we embrace the challenges and opportunities of new learning technologies? As the whole education system was being moved online, we had almost resigned ourselves to shelving Unblocking Potential (UP) to a Post-COVID rollout. After further discussion, we began to think of possible positive outcomes from an online UP programme. Potential benefits were reduction in travel time and cost; a wider geographical spread; evening delivery could suit those working and those with childcare responsibilities. We sought to create a programme that would benefit participants’ mental health through peer support, focused shared learning environment. Brooke et al.’s (2020)

review of studies which examined the psychological impact of quarantine suggests that on the whole this is a negative experience, which increases feelings of fear, isolation, loneliness and may contribute to stress, particularly where there are additional pressures at home, financial insecurity or prior mental health issues. These COVID-19 related issues are critical, and as adult educators, we need to be mindful that we do not place unrealistic demands on adult learners who may be experiencing any or all of these. They may also be at the frontline working with those who are struggling with their mental health.

Our key concerns were how to recruit and establish rapport in a completely online environment. In addition, we needed to revisit how the learning tasks would sensitively deconstruct mind-sets of failure, low self-esteem and create consciousness-raising learning within a virtual environment. We believe the key indicators for a successful learning environment for students and tutors are effective communication, a collaborative working relationship, and creative spaces where peer learning can flourish. Our ethos is firmly rooted in the value of the shared learning environment being horizontal rather than vertical where adults bring experiential knowledge and, as Tett, (2012, p.82) determined, this can lead to 'increasing competence [and] confidence in learning as people [are] regarded as knowledge-rich and thus able to contribute, rather than being seen as suffering from a skills deficit'. We invited one of our graduates, who taught on our UP programmes in the past as a part-time tutor and had recently been made a community ambassador of the University. This tutor worked alongside us to reshape the UP programme to fit a virtual framework. The first challenge was to design the 'getting to know you' exercises, ensuring each student would be given the space to engage with each other as well as the tutors. One of the advantages of a small group (14) using Zoom, was that the video of participants fitted on to the one screen.

This helped tremendously when we began the exercises. As tutors we had in our co-working preparation agreed to create a sense of group by displaying confidence in how we presented each exercise, in order to allow the students to gain self-confidence. We had already journeyed through a period of peer and self-reflection on our presentation skills and technological inefficacy as we begun navigating uncharted waters. This was key to our initial meeting with the students. We had to overcome our own hang-ups, fears and reservations about online teaching. Of paramount importance was to ensure the student experience would be a positive one. We especially wanted to ensure the programme would contribute positively to their mental wellbeing during the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 on the quality of their lived

experiences. We embedded quick response (QR) matrix barcodes with questions, a continuous polling station and live interactive teaching within a 'ZOOM' platform. These techniques proved to be very productive in terms of interaction and the students were very responsive, contributing to the smaller breakout groups and using their mobile phone apps to interface with the QR coded quizzes that were designed to gauge knowledge and understanding. Students also participated in check-in exercises using the virtual platform whiteboard, polling exercise, discussions, questions and posting emotional reactions with the use of 'emojis'.

The response was better than we expected. Each week we met in the virtual environment for two hours live interaction. There were hiccups such as Internet failure and distorted sound at times; however, we overcame these problems by adapting to each situation switching to WhatsApp group chat or discussions through the 'chat room'. As adult educators we were keen to engage in on-going evaluations reviewing each segment of the programme and addressing any issues that occurred. During the first session 60% of the group revealed they were dealing with mental health issues and most stated they were nervous of talking in a virtual space. The fact that they felt comfortable enough to disclose personal information at such an early stage and to a group of relative strangers was, as one student expressed, 'surprisingly cathartic'. We believe the dynamic of group connection was due to the effort made to encourage students to engage in the 'getting to know you' exercises. This allayed our fears that students might not engage in critical consciousness raising learning within an online setting. From the outset students' participation levels were high, and drawing from the trust established with each other, their self-confidence increased; even in the very early stages they were open to learning through critical reflection. The measure of success is reflected in the QR coded evaluations completed by students.

#### *Adult Learners' lived experiences of UP online*

Students stated they did face difficulties in working and studying at home. There is the distraction of caring for young children, juggling homework; finding a balance has taken its toll on the wellbeing of students who were already suffering with mental health issues pre COVID-19. When asked if participating in the course increased their self-confidence, one participant stated: 'it gave me a positive boost and the confidence to return to university'. The key to learning in this online environment was the positive relationship built up between students and tutors. The responses reflect the importance of building rapport between tutor and student that is firmly rooted in establishing a shared learning environment. This contributes to

the learning experience, encouraging students to interact and feel a sense of self-worth and being valued:

The tutors were very helpful and supportive. [Student A]

The tutors were excellent. Prepared me for uni. [Student B]

The programme gave me the opportunity to take part in a programme in my own relaxed environment, without having to leave home. [Student C]

This is an important take away for adult educators to recognise the benefits of remote learning rather than our preconceived notion that online, learning would be too difficult for them:

Truthfully, I loved it, it gave me a sense of achievement and my confidence has greatly improved, I enjoyed everything the UP material had to offer. [Student B]

Considering I have no qualifications, and my experience of formal education has been awful, this programme was a challenge, and gave me confidence. [Student D]

The feedback was encouraging as it resonates with Mezirow et al's (2000, p.8) argument that given the right educational environment, the learner can engage in transformative learning by 'constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of meaning of an experience in the world'. The majority of participants said they had previously 'struggled with learning', many expressed they had a negative experience of formal school life stating their 'teachers lacked empathy, respect and care'.

Students were invited to reflect on whether or not they thought the course helped improve their mental wellbeing. The responses indicate this was an important aspect of their progress, and indeed students who stated they had mental health problems said it was of vital importance to have a "relaxed and informal setting", and "being given the opportunity to meet other mature students". The content and method of delivery also contributed to the student wellbeing experience. This was evident in comments, which indicated students felt less stressful having experienced how the course was delivered:

The programme was very interactive and stress free. [Student E]

This was my first time studying online and it felt seamless. [Student A]

These comments from students exemplify the importance of designing an interactive online programme that takes cognisance of the low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. As experienced adult educators, we ensured that the online programme design was framed around andragogical principles. The key learning outcomes illustrate that the wellbeing of students is dependent upon establishing a good relationship between tutor and student, creating a shared learning experience.

Students expressed their frustrations of not being able to gain access to many of the individuals and groups in their communities whom they would normally engage with, as COVID-19 restrictions placed on their working schedules excluded contact. Some were furloughed and had little or no engagement apart from voluntary community food delivery and communicating by post/telephone. In many instances, groups were using the technology of websites such as Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp, Facetime, Twitter etc. to connect with groups and individuals. However, this was problematic for those most vulnerable who did not have access to these platforms. Indeed, it is clear that online engagement diminishes the learning experience and is a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction. Moreover, a common feature that has impacted students has been the additional stresses that COVID-19 has uncovered with uncertainties of employment, caring for family, relatives either ill or passing away. A recent study by AONTAS (2020, p.3) has highlighted some of the difficulties faced by adult learners:

Some adult learners fear for their lives due to existing health conditions; this is especially true for older learners, those with existing health conditions and for many learners with a disability. Indeed, during this period of unprecedented change, learners are experiencing loss of all kinds, and some will be grieving loved ones. A large number of learners are also dealing with the psychological, social, and financial impacts of job loss.

Students who engaged in the UP programme produced some highly innovative and creative ideas that were invaluable to the mental wellbeing of those experiencing isolation and mental health issues. Enabling participants to overcome their fears and doubts about their ability to learn is a key feature of the programme, which necessitated continual positive re-enforcement and signposting to student support where appropriate. The programme has been fortunate to gain funding from the University's widening participation grant. Nevertheless, the programme

operates on a very limited budget and normally relies on local community organisations supporting the programme, through providing a venue, in some cases hospitality to participants, free crèches and buses to bring students to the university campus. Our programme clearly outlines the benefits to individuals, communities and the university of bringing education to the people. We hope that this work can gain greater support so that more people can re-engage with learning in a positive environment, which values their experiences, builds their self-esteem and restores their humanity.

### *Adult educators' lived experiences of online teaching*

Disruption to the normal style of delivery, forcing staff to find an alternative method to engage with students and build a dialogical learning space was extremely challenging. For adult learners the challenges of working from home are problematic. This corresponds to issues found by AONTAS' (2020, p.5) report which highlighted issues associated with 'lack of access to libraries or community centres, which would normally provide resources for adult learners'. Adult educators share some of these frustrations; for example, finding quiet spaces to work at home, coupled with the demands of technology and providing extra support to students who already face insecurities about their ability to engage in education processes. The institutional response of HE to this unprecedented crisis focussed on a 'business as usual' approach. The AONTAS (ibid, p5) report suggests that community educators may be at greater risk of burnout, as tutors are challenged by the use of online tools and community organisations often relied on staff goodwill, to 'work over and above'. Our experiences in designing and delivering online outreach community education support these findings. In addition, staff reported themselves feeling stressed due to the difficult situations and vulnerabilities disclosed by students.

### *Conclusion*

Our paper started by framing neoliberalism as diametrically opposed to the Freirean values of emancipatory praxis. We contend however that '...within a complex and contradictory world...there exists spaces and opportunities for radical practice within such an environment' (Beck and Purcell, 2020, p.41). One significant outcome from the UP online programme has been the realisation that by having to face this digital dilemma on a shared platform, the relationship between the adult learner and adult educator has advanced our aim of horizontal learning, in other words, non-hierarchical learning which learning presupposes that knowledge exists within a community whose members are willing to learn from each other (Li, 2017). The



participation of students was high, and this led us to ascertain that for future online programmes it is essential to spend time establishing relationships by using a variety of group and individual exercises. By following our *modus operandi* to create the space, time and exercises to encourage students to experience a sense of belonging, we succeeded in creating a caring and empathic learning space, where students can gain confidence to tell their stories of being made to feel '*not good enough*' and in sharing their stories collectively, they begin to reframe their world. Tackling educational disadvantage and underachievement is not an easy task and we do not claim that this programme is a quick fix. Many participants who embarked on the programme are dealing with complex personal situations and come from backgrounds where education has never been prioritised.

The participants who have embarked upon the programmes outlined in this paper have embarked upon this journey of transformation, each starting from a different point and moving through this journey at their own pace. We believe these participants are in the process of becoming 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1971), with opportunities to create change within their local communities. They are at the intersection of theory and praxis, and through dialogue they critically analyse and change their own social constructs. Having broken through hegemonic barriers of social, economic and cultural oppression, they continue, as we all do, to struggle with the process of impacting social transformation. How we as adult educators manipulate these opportunities that are conducive to the virtual learning environment is challenging in the midst of this global COVID-19 crisis. Ledwith (2020, p.232) suggests '...radical community development needs to step up to play its role in a praxis for our times'. We need to skill up our knowledge of technology to create innovative interactive digital learning spaces. We need to learn how to respond to a diverse range of support needs of non-traditional students who are further isolated from real time educational opportunities. The dichotomy of real and virtual learning spaces remains problematic and requires vigilance. Notwithstanding the potential utilisation of online spaces under the neo-liberal guise of rationalisation, this online learning initiative has furnished us with a series of creative engagement processes for learners who face challenges travelling to university. In this new world we perhaps also need to pay more attention to the social crisis that adult learners face and develop a keener empathetic ethos that recognises the challenges they face within their personal and social lived experiences.

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