

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH IT: REFLECTIONS ON SURVIVING CRITICAL TIMES FROM IRISH ADULT EDUCATION

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An announcement was made by the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar TD on the morning of 12th March 2020 that educational institutions would close from 6pm that evening, to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19 (DES, 2020). As in other parts of the world, this was followed over the coming weeks by closure of most sectors of Irish society in "unprecedented actions to respond to an unprecedented emergency" (Doyle, 2020). These are indeed 'critical times' as the title states in more than one sense. Critical for population health in the short and medium term certainly, but also critical for us as adult educators in how we manage our being and doing as we transition from proximity to remoteness and distance. We hope this paper, based on student evaluations and tutor feedback, captures some of our shared experiences and reflections about living with uncertainty, learning in uncertainty and finding hope in emerging possibilities.

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH IT: THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

Although not unexpected, the sudden announcement sent shockwaves through the teaching profession as we shifted into crisis recovery mode. Home-based working, learning how to deliver classes online using different platforms and approaches of delivery was now imperative. In this instance, we were all working at home with the rest of our families – often several generations - combining personal, family, work and all aspects of living within the same space within the unprecedented context of an indefinite societal lockdown and unknowable global pandemic. In its immediacy, we were disorientated, gripped by a sense of fear which seemed to have no boundaries or limits, worried about being infected or infecting others, concerned about the health and wellbeing of those around us as well as our society as a whole. The taken-for-granted daily rituals and certainties of life were ripped asunder, with Hall describing how "concern about the welfare and well-being of my colleagues and students sit on top of a deeper set of anxieties about particular members of my family and friends, and buried beneath these are a deeper set of anxieties" (2020: 5).

Human nature being as it is, we tried to respond by attempting to balance some semblance of continuity and normalcy into our lives. Work was a major part of that ritual as schools and colleges attempted to continue to operate by shifting to online delivery in a "mirage of business-as-usual" (Hall, 2020: 2). This mirage became very real as we woke up the next morning and attempted to find a new work mode at home; the diffused new reality where work and courses continued to be run, no longer on campuses or in community centres however, but diffracted through online delivery in and out of home offices, sitting rooms, kitchens, attics and bedrooms across the country.

The immediate object for us all at this time was to find ways to enable learners to finish their programme and be as flexible and accommodating as possible in terms of changing planned assignments to take into account the general feeling of upset and disorientation that our learners felt.

The idea of finishing the course alone was very challenging. Many of the students were swamped enough already with new routines such as working at home, home-schooling at home and recent unemployment. They were struggling to adapt to "their new world". They were trying to finish assignments and keep their heads above water.
(Adult Educator B)

We were also sensitive to the fact that learners and staff were dealing with real life situations directly impacted by the virus on a personal level (becoming full time carers for elderly parents; dealing with childcare and new home-schooling responsibilities; teenager and young adults returning home; supporting family members who were frontline workers in the emergency, health and community services). Many learners spoke about how changes in their work circumstances, family or home conditions meant they did not have time, space and mental energy for their learning as before.

In May 2020, we surveyed staff and learners in Continuing Education (CE) about their experiences of the courses before and after the move to remote teaching. Eight adult education staff and 68 learners responded. These are lifelong learning students engaging continuing education programmes in addiction studies, community development, creative writing, disability studies, psychology and train the trainers in different adult education centres nationally (all organised and certified by the Department of Adult and Community Education). Their responses were analysed and coded using thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006) forming the basis of this paper.

LEARNING AS WE ARE DOING IT: ADULT EDUCATION ONLINE

In their responses, learners described the adult education ethos which had been created before the lockdown in the group-based dialogic processes.

I had a great experience with this course, before the lockdown it was the highlight of my week. It really became a safe space where we could talk about our ideas and our writing with no judgement.
[CE student 2888]

In the immediate aftermath of the lockdown announcement, people were delighted that courses could continue online but were apprehensive about working in a new format. Many said that the online classes worked well because they were based on pre-existing relationships.

A lot of time went into helping us bond as a group and we all worked very well together. I feel I learned a lot ... from my fellow students, and I enjoyed meeting everyone each week. The tutors created a very supportive and caring environment... The different teaching structures kept the classes interesting and I really enjoyed the learning process.
[CE student 0593]

This was reiterated by adult educators who felt that the transition to online "was made easier by the fact that we had well established relationships before the online course started." [Adult Educator C]

However, tutors were acutely aware that they were intruding onto existing group processes which was challenging for learners and staff alike.

I did in a way feel that we were hijacking a group dynamic that had already been established. The class were using it [WhatsApp] for information as well as class banter which was fine ... but I did feel that we had somewhat impinged on their "fun" group and I felt bad about that. [Adult Educator D]

Building on existing group dynamics and social networks between learners was acknowledged as key by the UNESCO UIL Webinar, noting that response to COVID-19 “has been aided greatly by the civically engaged students who were well integrated into community-based programmes ahead of the crisis. Connections between students and communities were already strong” (Zaalouk in AONTAS, 2020a). Our learners emphasised the vital role of relationships with tutors and classmates which “were deepened as there was an awareness of struggles for some during Covid-19 and patience given to include everyone in whatever capacity they could interact.” [CE student 4196]

Technical issues were a huge barrier for some learners, due to a feeling of not being “tech savvy”, and for those who have limited wifi in Ireland and across Europe (EAEA, 2020). In response, tutors had to come up with supportive and creative solutions to deliver material synchronously and asynchronously through responsive use of intersecting online platforms, messages, emojis, follow-up telephone calls, ongoing support from peers and tutors, use of existing AV and web recordings and podcasts. Educators spoke of the learning curve they had in designing these responses and becoming familiar with technologies they had not used for teaching before in a way that honoured the adult education ethos of their pedagogy.

I offered students the opportunity to post up a word or words which expressed how they felt. Being able to articulate difficult feelings and see that others felt the same way – the font size of the word cloud grows the more people use the same word – seemed to help participants come into the right mindset to engage with online learning. Enabling free, anonymous expression which draws on current emotional states this online writing seemed to be, to use bell hooks’ phrase (2009), a type of calling and stirring up. It was far more illuminating than had we conducted this exercise in a face-to-face environment. [Adult Educator E]

The emotional and liminal spaces which the COVID context evoked is a key part of this particular experience of online learning. It was a shift made in the context of an unknown and unknowable global pandemic, with one learner describing how:

For me everything shut down, we were trying to keep in contact through Whatsapp and our own student email but I removed myself for fear of causing myself anxiety because of posts being put up about Covid19. I am someone who has suffered severe anxiety and could not allow myself too much around already without others posting up stuff. [CE student 6969]

Learners spoke about “not knowing about so much the abnormality to life, the trying to get new routines, worried life never the same [sic] was demotivating to say least. Missing the classroom. Missing people”. [CE student 5121]

Many learners spoke about finding online communication challenging, as they felt “disconnected” finding the interaction style “stilted” or felt it was “easier to hide in the background and not talk, it did take some effort to make myself try and involve myself in the discussions” [CE student 2888]. Some spoke about how they “felt very vulnerable allowing tutors and classmates into my home” [CE student 6282]. They acknowledged that it is “very difficult to develop inter-student relationships” [CE student 7637] in online spaces. Many felt that the discursive nature of adult education pedagogy was difficult to maintain in online formats.

While many learners found it very challenging initially due to newness and unexpectedness of learning online, many did adapt to online learning, citing the importance of support from their classmates and tutors in this. Over two thirds of learners gave mixed to negative evaluation about learning online, acknowledging that online communication and learning does occur, but that *“face to face learning and live discussion makes it easier to digest ideas and keep in deep memory”* [CE student 1225]. The dialogic basis of adult education, its roots in learner experience and practice and its use of group processes means that the communications and relationships at the heart of adult education pedagogy are challenging to create and maintain in a virtual learning environment (Jarvis, 2010). Many students enrol *“to engage with practitioners, to exchange ideas, to network with like-minded people, both inside and outside of class times and to get to know people from their locality that they might not have known before”*.
(Adult Educator F)

Educators spoke of how they had to become learners themselves, feeling enormous pressure to rapidly upskill themselves about online pedagogy and platforms. The urgency required to affect this switch gives weight to Stitch’s (2000) thesis in relation to accelerated learning underpinned by functional context. This pressure was self-imposed in terms of their commitment to their job, pedagogical craft and learners, but was also part of the expectation that higher education would maintain ‘business-as-usual’ and adjust to delivering the same programme objectives and content but in an online format (Hall, 2020). *“The transition forced me to become a learner – and a fast one! – in how I worked on-line and how I engaged in the tools that had been created to mimic real-class situations”* [Adult Educator E]. Tutors had to be adaptive, switching mid-cycle at a day’s notice to a new mode of online learning: *“This was a serious learning curve for everyone. We were taking it week to week and hoping for the best”* [Adult Educator D]. For some, this experience of online delivery was *“the antithesis of what a university is all about”* [Adult Educator A].

Educators had to adjust their ways of engaging and communicating with learners in ways that suited the new learning environment and maintained the interactive modes of engagement which they valued:

Instead of reading the room – as I had been doing – I found myself reading chats, using hand up and thumbs up as ways to communicate – and recording each session so that those who had poor internet connections could download the videos and look at them in their own time.
[Adult Educator E]

In some cases, they described advantages for learners (and themselves) in terms of the benefits of commuting and being at home for evening sessions. Online provision did allow asynchronistic delivery which learners could access at any time and view at a pace and timing which suited them. Live online sessions *“allow for a degree of flexibility with regard to start and finish - e.g. if a student has to arrive late or leave early it is less disruptive”* [Adult Educator D]. For other learners, it enabled them to keep engaged, when they *“had unexpected surgery in February and was really only able to continue the course because it went online”* [Adult Educator, C].

Educators were highly innovative and caring in how they connected with learners, describing how they created spaces for check-ins, contacted all learners through phone and emails in the days immediately after lockdown, checking how people were, exploring what supports they needed, offered repeated feedback on accessing online material, reading assignment drafts and extended submission deadlines.

In other instances, they had to adapt what they could use due to limited wifi connectivity or technological knowledge to access online platforms and so worked through the existing technologies with which learners were familiar as also occurred across Europe (EAEA, 2020)

We came up with the idea of continuing with Moodle [online platform] but to add a lot more material to the slides than normal to give the students more information. This was coupled with sourcing relevant academic papers, documentaries and podcasts to strengthen the learning. A weekly discussion topic was also put on Moodle to allow students to engage with each other and the new material. Another tactic used was to join the class whatsapp group as this seemed to be the fastest and most direct route to getting information to the students [Adult Educator B]

My broadband proved to be a challenge and after having to abandon a lecture one week due to poor quality I completed the course plugged directly into the main modem, meaning I spent 3 weeks broadcasting from my hall! [Adult Educator C]

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH IT: PLANNING FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

As this academic year draws to a close, we plan for the next with a very uncertain future in terms of the direction that the virus will take, what teaching will look like, what the economy will look like, and greater levels of precarity amongst learners and educators alike. Choices for Lifelong Learning and Adult Education will be made, and decisions taken regarding cost effectiveness and desired outcomes will accelerate change in the sector (Hall, 2020). The pandemic has provided a wider context for ongoing discussion about instrumental and social justice purposes of education.

There are practical issues too in relation to the need to develop to online ways of engagement into the future and to be able to flexibly switch between formats (given the potential of more lockdowns). Learners want to connect together and spoke of how their course of study “*provided some normality and a welcome relief at a frightening stressful time ... to reconnect with each other*” [Adult Educator C]. As this research has revealed, this raises challenges for adult education whose pedagogy is typically based on group relationships, collaborations and dynamics. While this shifts online, it is challenging for learners and educators who miss the direct engagement and relational aspects of being together, the “*tea-breaks and chats*” representing “*the quality of discussions and group activities*” that are at the heart of adult education pedagogy. While adult educators and learners demonstrated enormous ingenuity in learning online, they also asked fundamental questions about the nature of learning.

How do we hold on to active participation and collaborative learning in the absence of group sessions? Information and discussion can be provided through ICT but the human interaction...will be difficult to achieve. [Adult Educator B]

What the lockdown has given us is a break in continuity. It has given us the time to be innovate and creative. Disorientation has become a watchword. Change is the only constant and it was ever thus. Work / life change has been accelerated. But it has also given us the space to think about our lives in existentialist terms (Ryan, 2019). The difficulty in implementing alternatives is that the idea of them is too painful to contemplate, but there is always learning from the unknown:

There still is a bright future for adult education in the university now. It has called upon us to be creative with our teaching methods, and to embrace the unknown. For many students, it was a real saving grace to have the course to focus on and they embraced it ... Whilst it was a challenging situation for us all, there is a lot to be learned from it. [Adult Educator D]

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