

Community Based Lifelong Learning in a Time of Change: A critical perspective

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Criticality

Drawing on critical theory, critical realism, critical pedagogy and critical sociology wish to highlight 6 dimensions of a critical perspective

- ❖ Ethical commitment to work against unnecessary suffering and support human **flourishing** (based on love, care and solidarity).
- ❖ Attending closely to politics and **power** (sources, forms, flows, distribution and logic).
- ❖ Grasp what is really happening in our world and why. This requires breadth and depth, ambition and modesty. (**Realism** based on depthontology and a qualified relativism).
- ❖ **Reflexivity**: scrutinising assumptions about self, institutions and society.
- ❖ Taking reflective action with others (**Praxis**)
- ❖ Need to combine, as Robert Musil put it, a sense of reality and a **sense of possibility**

Imagination and criticality

- Imagination is fundamental to exploring what is possible.
- Interested in a form of imaginative which is grounded *and* anticipatory. This “has a power to see into things, to feel into things, to be at one with things anew to produce a new understanding of the object of imagination” (Barnett, 2013, p. 25; see also Bloch, 1985).
- Many sources: writing, art, literature, philosophy, popular culture, history and immersion in nature etc., etc.



Let's begin with a simple question: 'what is really happening? '

- An invitation to pause to explore metaphors and images of our worlds.
- An example WB. Yeats and *Meditations on a Time of Civil War*

Empty nest by my window

The bees build in the crevices
Of loosening masonry, and there
The mother birds bring grubs
and flies.
My wall is loosening; honey-
bees,
Come build in the empty house
of the stare.
We are closed in, and the key is
turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house
burned,
Yet no clear fact to be discerned:
Come build in the empty house
of the stare.

A barricade of stone or of wood;
Some fourteen days of civil war;
Last night they trundled down the
road
That dead young soldier in his
blood:
Come build in the empty house of
the stare.
We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the
fare;
More Substance in our enmities
Than in our love;
O honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of
the stare.

Lifelong learning: origins and characteristics

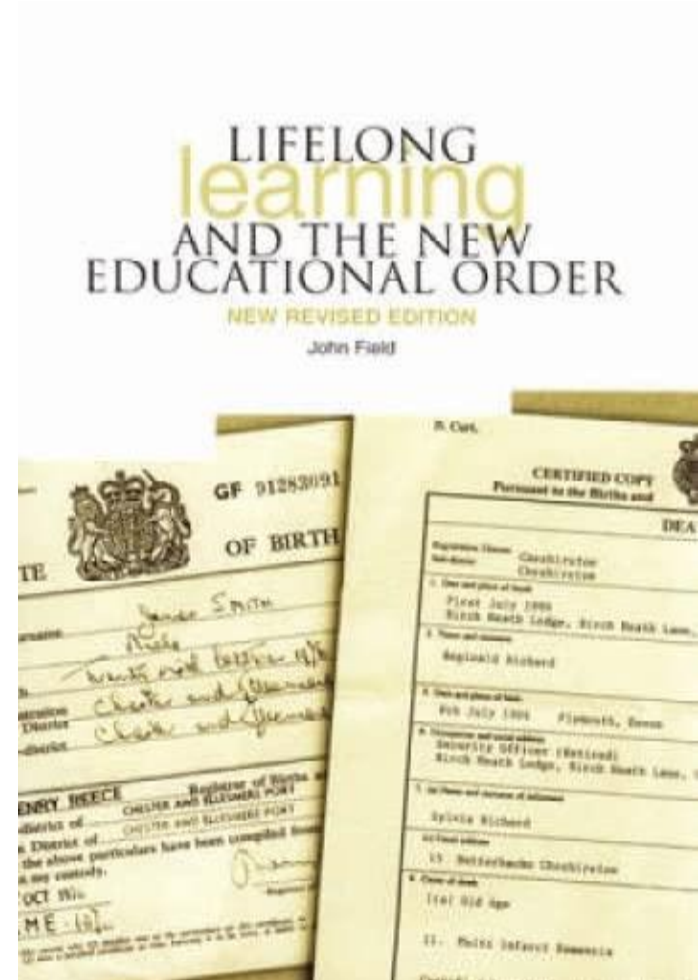
As John Field (2008) points out LLL is a remarkably attractive and simple idea. It has grown in importance in past thirty years leading to the emergence of 'new educational order' ?

LLL was prompted by:

- ❖ New patterns in employment and ways of living;
- ❖ The astonishing expansion of education;
- ❖ Crises (social, economic, ecological).

Key aspects of LLL:

- ❖ Acknowledgment of the limits of existing educational institutions;
- ❖ Learning as lifelong and lifewide;
- ❖ Emphasis on human potential.



LLL: an assessment of a mature project

We can review varied policies, initiatives and practices in a very wide range of contexts. Excellent body of research much of it from adult educators.

What does this research suggest about the **impact and development of LLL?**

1. LLL widely diffused (UNESCO, 2023) but noticeable gap between rhetoric and reality (Elfert, 2017)
2. Over time, it is argued, LLL policies has become more instrumental individualized and less critical. From 'learning to be' to 'learning to be productive and employable' (Biesta, 2006; see also Shannon, 2019).

Community in LLL policy

Tracing the use of community in key LLL policy documents- Faure report, Delors report, EU commission documents, UN 2030 and recent EU and UNESCO documents appears that community has become more important 'site' of LLL. Three possible reason suggest themselves:

1. LLL projects not reaching targets and aspirations.
2. Changing role of HE: increasing emphasis on community engagement.
3. Wider interest in potential of local democracy since late 1960s which grew in past thirty years (for instance experiments in municipalism, participatory budgeting and planning in Barcelona, Brazil, Kurdistan, Mexico etc.).

Community: mindful of possibilities, against romanticism

Community is almost always invoked as an unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging [..] Because it carries such positive connotations community is deployed by any and everyone pressing any sort of cause (Joseph, 2002 p.vii)



Adult education and the community: Workers Educational Association



WEA group 1921



Sheila Rowbotham



E P Thompson

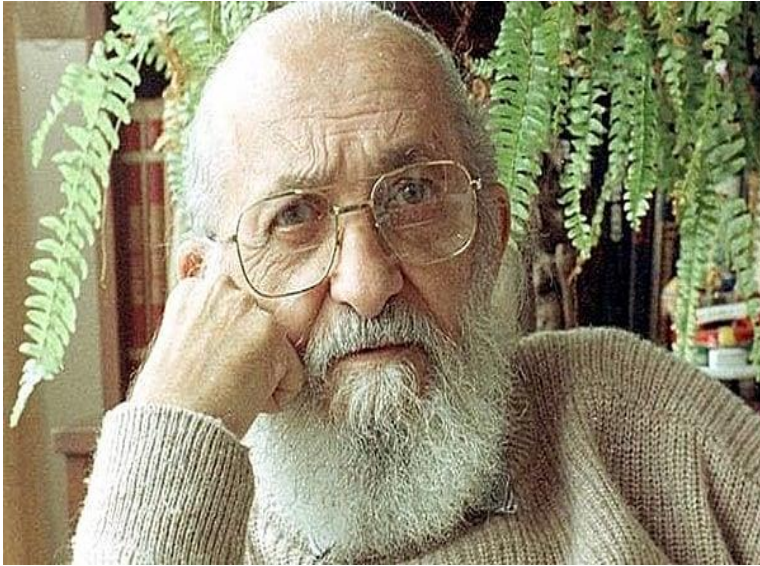
Folk high schools and the story of Highlander



Myles Horton and Rosa Parks below



The centrality of community in Popular Education



Paulo Freire



Colombian popular ed comic (see Fals-Borda and Rappaport)



Landless movement school
See Rebecca Tarlaiu

Irish community education

- Strong community movements 1970s – 1990s demanding improved social services and a response to housing and addiction problems etc.
- The emergence of community adult education. Remarkable creativity and imagination
- Now institutionalized and approach used very widely.
- Largely separate from HE. Perhaps most significantly for this conference are initiatives such as An Cosán which provide pathways to HE courses, experiments like the 'Communiversities' and projects such as 'Learning cities'.



Principles of good practice

- Working democratically from the 'bottom-up' to identify and address community needs on an ongoing basis.
- Building relationships over time, giving time to relationship building.
- Using collaborative/negotiated curricula.
- Employing flexible pedagogies based on dialogue which honour different ways of knowing and learning (arts-based activities, walking tours, mapping etc.)
- Exploring the personal and local/Paying attention to the political and social.
- Fostering critical reflection across projects,
- Creating a sense of belonging in communities which are necessarily incomplete. Key to making community in a complex, plural world .

I believe work of this sort points to LLL within a 'knowledge democracy'? (Tandon, Singh, Clover & Hall, 2016; see also Mayo, 2020; Tett, 2002).

Contemporary trends and community based LLL

- **Educational shifts:** outcome-based learning (Allais, 2014), less autonomy in pedagogy and curricula, deskilling of practitioners within low trust environments.
- **Policy trends:** top-down, push towards commercialization and marketisation, increased bureaucracy and overreporting (Ball, 2007) with focus quantity over quality , employability and skills (Shannon, 2019)
- **Dominant social logic:** profit and growth driven, highly instrumental, competitive, fragmenting, and unimaginative (Fraser, 2022; Lefebvre, 1991).

Examples from Ireland (Finnegan & Cernikova, 2022, Creedon, forthcoming).

Emerging challenges to community based LLL.

Volatile and uncertain times characterized by **grave social and environmental crises**

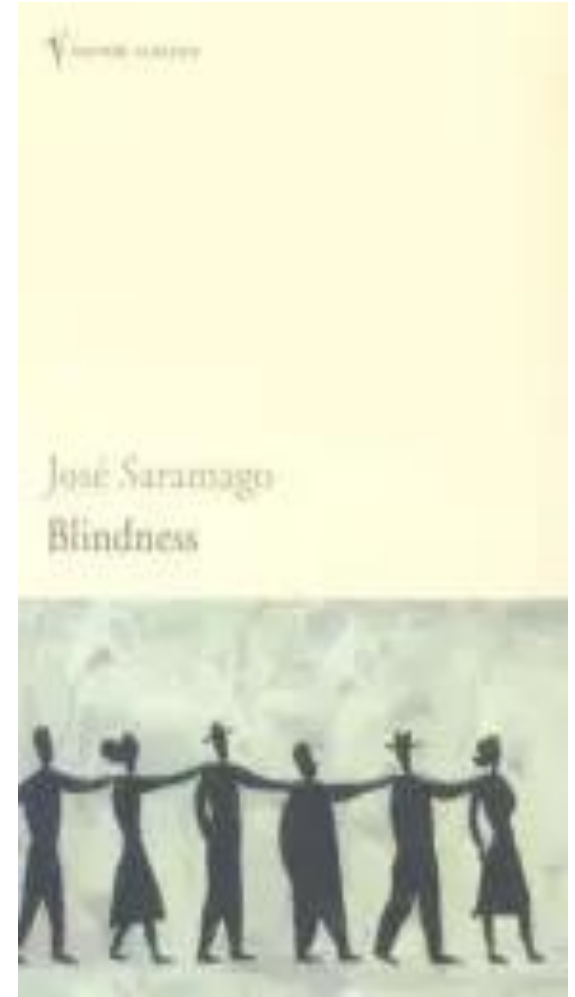
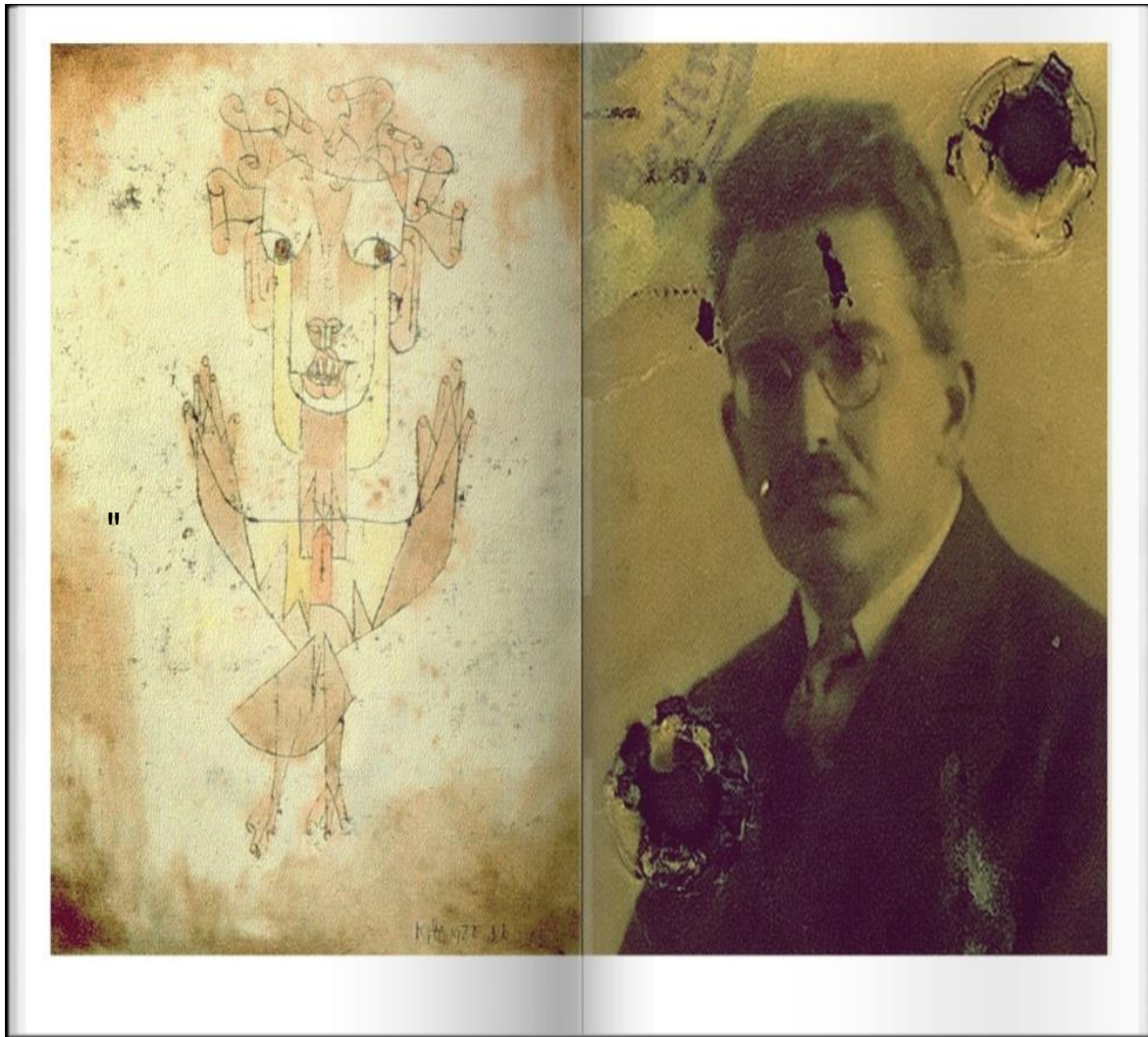
Corrosion of democracy through: 1) concentration of power/ wealth (Bank Suisse, 2024; Oxfam, 2023; Sayer, 2015); 2) degeneration of public 'sphere' (Wainwright, 2011) ; 3) use and misuse of new social media in a new 'mirror world' (Klein, 2023). The viral spread of type of of learnt stupidity?

Darkness visible. **Increase in authoritarian and fascist politics** (Mudde, 2016) & celebration of domination and brutality. Promotion of regressive fantasies of purity, hierarchy and regeneration (Toscano, 2023). Based on a vision of closed communities and lifelong learning of obedience.



Pic Sebastiao Salgado

Sparks of hope



Walter Benjamin various writing on history. Jose Sarmago's novel blindness

Excerpt From 'Liminal'

I've always loved thresholds
the stepping over,
the shape changing that can happen
when you jump off the edge into pure breath
and then the passage between inner and outer
Mist becomes cloud, becomes rain. Water, Ice, Water.
In the daily flux, no telling where one will end or begin.
Death can kick start and birth be the true E Fin,
You jig and reel through molecular spin, daughter.
Nothing can harm you or cure you. You've found
A clear path through the chaos, a loaning
From history and whether you are free or bound
Is still in the balance.

By Paula Meehan



Grazie

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