

International Training Conference, New Dynamics of Learning and Ageing: Research, Policy and Practice

20-22 March 2012, National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM)

Report by Jonathan Hughes



Robin Webster (Age Action Ireland), Jo Walker (AEA Chair) and Ted Fleming (NUI Maynooth) at our Maynooth international conference

This conference was organised in partnership by the Association for Education and Ageing, Age Action Ireland, the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme and the WEA (Northern Ireland). Ambitiously, the conference had five aims:

- To identify new areas of teaching and learning, especially through arts and creativity.
- To share good practice about adults' learning and educational opportunities.
- To include the voice of the older learner.
- To highlight the EU year of Active Ageing and intergenerational Solidarity (2012).
- To showcase the work of conference partners and other contributors.

It is worth saying at the outset that these aims were met, and probably exceeded, in what turned out to be a fascinating and lively conference marked out by a real sense of place derived, in no small part, by its setting in Maynooth.

Historically, St Patrick's College in Maynooth has trained more Roman Catholic priests than anywhere else in the world (some 11,000 in total). A small seminary still exists in parallel to the secular National University which still trains a small number of priests each year. However, the legacy remains clear in the building and in the rooms which used for the conference. There is a magnificent chapel, which was opened especially for conference delegates and plenary sessions where held in the Renehan room which is where the Irish bishops have always met and continue to do so. Indeed, one of the speakers, herself a graduate of Maynooth revealed that in her day, the Renehan room was strictly out of bounds to students.

The conference was formally opened by the Principal of the NUIM, Philip Nolan, who indicated that in its various incarnations, there has always been a commitment to

inclusiveness and to action, activism and questioning. Philip also noted that NUIM had the best department of Adult Education in Ireland and underlined his view that the inclusive stance taken by NUIM enriched not just learners but the university too.



Professor Tom Scharf speaking at the conference

The first key note speaker was Professor Tom Scharf (Director of the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, NUI Galway). Tom took a helpful but critical look at the idea of active ageing which, implicitly or explicitly, underpins much thinking and practice in relation to older people - not least the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. Tom's critique of the concept of active ageing stemmed from what he saw as a tendency to prescribe unattainable goals for some older people for example, those with dementia, or who are frail or who live in poverty. Tom was also critical of active ageing because it individualises the risks associated with ageing and distracts from the real purpose of public policy which, Toms argued, is to promote the welfare of all as they age. Thus 'active ageing' ignores the role of the market and, instead, focuses on what Tom called the moral dimension of ageing. As a way of analysing policy initiatives Tom drew on the work of Ruth Levitas who differentiates three different discourses or approaches to social exclusion. These are RED - a redistributive discourse, MUD- a moral underclass discourse and SID – a social integration discourse. RED sees poverty as the main cause of exclusion. MUD focuses on the behaviours of the excluded and SID focuses on employment. As Tom put it, in RED people have no money, in SID they have no work and in MUD they have no morals. Awareness of these different approaches can be used as a framework against which to assess different policies. Tom concluded by suggesting that this highlighted the need to focus on learning as this can address the risks posed by social issues in ways ignored by 'active ageing'.

During the lunch break on day one, Keith Percy and Jo Walker gave a cogent presentation about the International Journal of Education and Ageing. I know that both were pleased with the way that this went and were hopeful that there would be additional subscribers and new contributors as a result.

The first and second of the first of the three parallel sessions took place before and then after lunch. Delegates heard about work that is going in across Europe. I attended a paper given by Nick Walters on *Active Participation for times of austerity – older adult learning* and a paper by Lynne Weallans, *Enhancing experience of ageing through lifeplanning*. Both were fascinating presentations and I would urge you to have a look at what is available on the AEA website. Nick pointed out that we need to

re-visit the assumptions we have about later life and reassess whether (in times of austerity) the high expectations of now-retiring ‘baby boomers’ may become increasingly outdated. Lynne Weallans (from the Beth Johnson Foundation) highlighted the value of lifeplanning throughout life while raising interesting issues about the implications of seeing our own lives as a ‘project’ and about the role of learning in this project.

Lynne also touched on intergenerational learning – a theme that was picked up by Tiina Tambaum in her presentation, *Internet learning needs in intergenerational teaching and learning*. Tiina highlighted the need for younger people to be pro-active in their interactions with older learners but found that they were often unprepared to act in this way. I gave my own presentation about a Grundtvig funded project which introduced technology to older people through creating opportunities to play with. This was followed by Raquel Patricio talking about *Technology for learning in Arts and Creativity*. This project enabled older people to teach younger people about local traditions in northeast Portugal while learning ICT skills from the younger people.



Marvin Formosa (Univ of Malta), Martina Ni Cheallaigh (European Commission) and Jo Walker (AEA)

Two plenary sessions completed a full and fascinating day. These were very different in both content and style. The first provided a European dimension and featured contributions from Martina Ni Cheallaigh from the European Commission who spoke about *European Policy in lifelong learning and older learners* and from Louise Richardson, Age Platform Europe, on *The European Year of Active Ageing – where does learning fit?* These talks were both highly detailed. It was good to have this input which reminded us that the issue of learning in later life receives from more attention in the European context than it does in the UK at least. It was also interesting to hear that all the current programmes (Erasmus, Comenius, Leonardo and Grundtvig) will be brought together as ‘Erasmus for all’ – although some concern was expressed that smaller organisations might find it harder to make successful bids in future.

The final session of the day was a keynote address by Dr Ted Fleming, *Cinderella or Princess? History and other narratives of adult education in a university*. This was a terrific talk and I would urge you to make the time to read the transcript. However the truth is you really had to be there to appreciate the value of Ted’s address. Ted drew on his own experience of adult education to highlight how learning has played a key role in the contest over Irish core values. He charted, with great scholarship and wit, how Ireland has seen changing frames of reference being developed which are

available to help adult make meaning. He argued that an economic frame of reference has supplanted the one provided by the Catholic Church but questioned the value of this frame. Ted drew on the ideas of Habermas and Mezirow to suggest that education is valuable because it makes us more aware of these frames and of, perhaps more importantly, the need for better ones. He pointed out that in a more inclusive, democratic, open and flexible society the only power that should operate is the power of a good argument.

The final day of the conference opened with a plenary led by Dr Marvin Formosa from the European Centre of Gerontology, University of Malta, *Missing Voices in Older Adult Education: Reaching the outsiders*. Marvin noted that while the EU is an advocate of lifelong learning, the focus tends to be on economic competitiveness and active citizenship. This, he argued, leaves some people out. Marvin argued that women, the middle class, city dwellers and those who are mobile and alert participate more while the working class, men and ethnic minorities are more likely to be excluded, as are those in the 'fourth age' and people who are home-bound and their carers. Marvin suggested that the root of the problem is that decisions about widening participation strategies are made by academics rather than older people and that this could be mitigated by a Freirean approach in which teachers negotiated the curriculum with older people.

Lunch was followed by the final paper session. I chaired Esmeraldina Veloso, *Active ageing and strategy in the EU and Portugal; rights to education* and Keith Percy, *Educational gerontology in practice and principle*. Esmeraldina highlighted the problems faced by older learners in Portugal where older people have a high rate of illiteracy. In addition, low rates of participation amongst older Portuguese people mean that the opportunities that learning could provide to combat loneliness and promote civic engagement and physical and mental well-being are lost.



Keith Percy,

Keith Percy's paper charted a discussion initiated by Glendinning and Battersby in the 1990s and recently revived by Marvin Formosa. Keith took issue with Marvin's suggestion that later life learning should unsettle the complacencies of older people. Keith questioned whether older learners really needed such 'unsettling' and

questioned what teachers would actually do, and whether older learners would put up with it. Keith found himself agreeing with much of Marvin's argument in principle but was concerned that education practice was left unaddressed.

There remained a plenary session from Professor Sue Hallam, Institute of Education, London who spoke on *Researching music in later life within the New Dynamics of Ageing Research Programme*. This was a fascinating presentation about a research project which found that music-making in later life led to consistently higher scores on measures of well-being and also found that participants attributed significant social emotional and health benefits.

The conference was rapidly drawing to a close and delegates' thoughts were turning to train times and airport departures. However, there was still time for a review (led by Jim Soulsby) of what the conference had achieved. It was clear that the conference had been well organised and stimulating and that links between practice and academic theory had been usefully explored. Delegates felt that they had learned a great deal and had made new links with other people at the conference. We also felt that we needed to go on talking to each other to build on these connections and to help develop the role of later life learning.