

Review

Leona M. English and Catherine J. Irving (2015), *Feminism in Community: Adult Education for Transformation*, Sense Publishers: Rotterdam. Paperback £28.

This is the kind of book that ignites your spirit when you are assailed on all sides with neo-liberal agendas. These agendas convey messages about ‘value for money’ education, labour activation, economic development, all of which took centre stage in adult education in Ireland over the past few years. Leona English and Catherine Irving succeed in shifting the lens away from the pure marketisation of the field towards a more enriching, politically aware and egalitarian focus. They identify the gap in the literature on women and learning and the intersection of race, ethnicity, class and gender. In the wider debates on equality, women as a category have become increasingly invisible, but even more worryingly, the authors maintain that there is a general dilution of previously powerful pedagogies in favour of more superficial, short-term and individualised outcomes. For example, while we have interrogated the notion of empowerment for many years, at least the concept was and is about power. Now, however, this concept is reduced to ephemeral, almost inconsequential ideas about self-esteem and confidence, devoid of social and gender analysis. This is a very long way from the political aims of feminism, yet it dominates many public and media discussions on the status of women.

I was delighted to catch up with Leona English when she visited Ireland in September 2016. She spoke about her adherence and commitment to feminism, and recounted how she was advised that her book wouldn’t sell if the word feminism - or variations of the word – was on the cover. The ambivalence about the word and the aims of feminism is telling. But the courage to persist with the word is a mark of the authors’ steadfastness and dedication.

The book covers a wide range of adult education through the feminist lens, including health, social movements, religion, research, community, pedagogy and arts. Each chapter draws on scholarship and practice from around the world, from Canada to India to Ireland to Africa, with insights from communities of women from women's arts and crafts to the LGBTQ community, to women in development. Further, they acknowledge the range of the oppressions of women, the full gamut of misogyny and how it is hidden in the more generalised discussion on equality. The scope, though wide, is not superficial. Rather, each focus provides a deep lens to illuminate their dialogue, which enables readers to reflect on their own particular and local circumstances. Indeed, the organisation of each chapter supports this resonance, by ending each with a section on discussion. For example:

We are moving from art as product to art as process, or justice in the making. As women engage in art, they are enabled with good facilitation (the adult education role) to surface complex issues and to deal with them in a more supportive environment (p.55)

As an adult educator and adult learner, I endorse this position fully. Everyone is creative to some degree or other. I love writing fiction and poetry and have for years incorporated all kinds of creative writing within my feminist pedagogy in the learning environment for years. However, I have to ensure that the group does not have literacy issues, otherwise creative writing would continue the alienation and oppression that many people experience, no matter how emancipatory and consciousness raising my intention is. But there are so many other aspects of creativity that won't disadvantage people, including traditional crafts that might have been downgraded and devalued because they were more associated with women. These crafts and arts include needlework, textiles and embroidery. I was lucky to be involved in a quilt that was created by a textile artist to commemorate 77 women¹ who were incarcerated following the Easter Rising in 1916, a revolution which was the catalyst in the fight for Irish independence and the eventual foundation of the Irish Republic. The artist chose textiles and embroidery because these skills are very familiar to women and almost unknown in the education of boys. And this experience

was a perfect example of creative feminist pedagogy, feminist research and feminist social movements.

So, having reflected critically on this text that lifted my heart and ignited my dedication, what would I do differently or what can I add to this discussion? For sure, I see that andragogy has been given a slot of its own in the index without problematizing this neologism which is fundamentally flawed. While Knowles popularised it for adult education, it actually means the education (or leading) of men, (Smith, 1996, 1999, 2010).ⁱⁱ

On the other hand, I applaud the editors' deliberate transgression of the APA system by providing full first names. This is a small, but hugely significant step in making women's work more visible in scholarship. This book is essential reading for all adult educators and learners who are concerned with the androcentrism of critical pedagogy and social movements. Without feminism, no progress can be made. And this is the ultimate aim of adult education for transformation.

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ⁱ This quilt is exhibited in Richmond Barracks

<http://www.richmond Barracks.ie/exhibitions/> accessed 30th September 2016.

ⁱⁱMark Smith, 1996, 1999, 2010) *Andragogy: what is it and does it help thinking about adult learning?* <http://infed.org/mobi/andragogy-what-is-it-and-does-it-help-thinking-about-adult-learning/> accessed 30th September 2016)