‘Adult Education: a public good or commodity?’
A review of practitioner perspectives to current policy and practice in Ireland.

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Introduction
This paper looks at the political economy of capitalism and how it relates to the purpose of adult education in Ireland. The mode of inquiry utilised is constructivist and the methodology is located in research discourse. The method consists of a literature review, document analysis and a focus group interview with adult education practitioners managing programmes in a local education authority (Co. Carlow VEC). I adopt a critical inquiry approach to the knowledge domains and locate my position as a social purpose adult educator working in this adult education landscape.

This paper arose about from my disquiet/discomfort with the direction of adult education and I wondered whether this discomfort resonated with other colleagues working in a local education authority. This paper is a review of practitioner perspectives.

Who speaks?
Tomlinson (1991) in his examination of cultural imperialism repeatedly uses the question ‘Who Speaks?’ (p.109). Much hangs on the question ‘who speaks?’, he states that we cannot simply argue that only the informed speak, or that only informed western intellectuals’ concern is more valid. Equally in this paper I take up the notion of ‘who speaks?’

‘Who speaks’ are the participants of the focus group, adult education practitioners voicing their perspectives on the role of adult education in Ireland today and the policy pressures that challenge these perspectives. In presenting this paper, I will let the theory and policy speak for itself. It is to a theoretical framework and policy context and discourse that I now turn.

Neo- liberalism
It is well documented that there is a neo-liberal agenda in the pursuit of education (Lynch, 2009; Ball, 2008; Sugrue (eds), 2008; Finneran, 2008; Tett, 2008; Gouthro, 2008; Walters, 1979). Lynch (2009) argues that within the
neo-liberal agenda, civil society is being aggressive colonised. In these times adult education is in danger of becoming essentially consumerist. Lynch (2009) states that neo-liberalism defines the person to be educated in economic terms, as ‘homo economicus’ a labour market actor whose life and purposes are determined by their economic status (p.8). The model citizen at the centre of this liberal education system is as Lynch et al (2007) suggests a rational citizen and a public persona; it is a person who is being prepared for economic, political and cultural life in the public sphere, but not for a relational life as an independent, caring and other-centred human being (p. 2).

**European Policy Context**

Education is increasingly been thought about and made within the context of ‘pressures’ and requirements of globalisation. The European Council meeting in Lisbon in 2000 which confirmed the European Union’s (EU) commitment to lifelong learning emerged out of discussions on how to improve economic competitiveness of European countries. Grek (2008) cites the Presidency conclusions of the European Union being confronted with a quantum shift resulting from globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy (2008 p.259). Policy abstractions like globalisation and the knowledge economy are now translated into targets and outcomes which are being placed on the practices within adult education provision.

The dominance of audit and accountability can be witnessed. There is the focus on what Ball refers to as policy technologies (2008, p 41): on performance regimes, with productivity and performance related pay, where educational practitioners are viewed as units of labour to be distributed and managed, in the states endeavour to modernise the public sector.

The use of highly prescriptive systems of accountability, performance indicators, quality assurance, achievement targets, begs the question; do these indicators stand for and represent valid, worthwhile or meaningful learning? In many instances what you have is a reductive approach to adult education, where individuals are viewed as economic creatures.

**Irish Policy Context and Discourse**

Fleming has argued that some might say that the Irish state has become seduced by the economy to act in its interest. In this way the tendency of the state is to support a vision of lifelong learning and adult education that sustains the economy and values learning that involves job skills and upskilling. (Fleming, 2004 p.15)

Fleming goes on to suggest that there are legitimate concerns that the state ought to have i.e. the common good, justice, care and the exercise of power in the interests of all its citizens. (p.15) While, the state ought to concern itself
with active citizenship, there is a conflict between the system world (state and the economy) and civil society. Finneran espouses that An examination of equality, democracy and somewhat less conclusively, social values suggests the Irish state and Irish society have been reconfigured as part of a global neo-liberal revolution and that free market ideas are now the determining and dominant ideas in society. (Finneran, 2008 p.64)

The dominant neo-liberal ideas of Irish society are illustrated in Irish policy documents. It is to a discourse of two prominent documents that I now turn.

The National Development Plan 2007-2013, ‘Transforming Ireland- A Better Quality of Life for All’ (2007), sets out a programme of integrated investments that will underpin Ireland’s ability to grow economically, socially and environmentally. As well as providing physical infrastructure, a major focus of the plan is on investment in education, science, technology and innovation. Education and skills are considered within this plan as ‘human capital’ to be ‘traded’ in the global marketplace. The plan sets down output priorities as follows:

- To upskill the workforce through promoting access to appropriate training for lifelong learning;
- To implement the National Skills Strategy with the goal of increasing the skills levels of a significant proportion of those at work in support of Ireland’s aims of improved competitiveness and moving jobs quality up the value chain; (Ireland, 2007 p.189)

While there is a social inclusion programme within the document, which seeks to enable the representation of marginalised groups, this representation is seen mainly in terms of participation in the workforce. The strategic context then sees the aim for social inclusion as providing

- Second chance education for adults in various settings and contexts both formal and informal; and provide vocational preparation and training for adult labour market entrants and re-entrants.

(Ireland, 2007 p.247)

From the language of the aim outlined here, it appears there is indeed support of Tett’s (2008) argument that even policies that are concerned to achieve greater social inclusion are modified and co-opted by the requirements of economic participation and the labour market (p.496).

highly skilled population which contributes to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based participative and inclusive economy. The report lays down the following targets to be met by 2020:

- 48% of the labour force should have qualifications at NFQ levels 6-10;
- 45% should have qualifications at Levels 4-5;
- the remaining 7% will have qualifications at Levels 1 to 3 and within this objective, Ireland should aim to build capacity at fourth level and double its PhD output (level 10) by 2013 (EGFSN, 2007 p.62)

The strategy priorities the need for the honing of skills for emerging technologies, for instance science literacy, scientific skill base intertwined with engineering and information sciences are recommended requirements for upskilling the workforce.

Since the publication of the EGFSN (2007) policy document, there has been a global economic recession. Economic downturn illustrates that the Irish economy is in the midst of a contraction that is large by historic and international comparisons (ESRI). For the first quarter in 2009 figures for job-loss stand at between 500 to 1,000 jobs per day (IBEC), mostly incurred in the private sector. Property prices continue to drop; there has been the collapse in the construction industry and a crisis in the banking sector and trade union unrest. It is against this backdrop of economic recession and the maintenance and creation of employment that the ‘health’ of adult education is positioned. It is to the voice of the adult educator to which I now turn.

**The focus group**

A semi-structured focus group interview was conducted with adult education managers/practitioners within a local education authority, Co. Carlow VEC. Six managers attended representing Community Education, Traveller Training, Adult Guidance, Adult Literacy, Back to Education Initiative and a young early school leavers programme, Youthreach. As a member of this adult education team and having good working relationship with my colleagues, I facilitated this focus group interview. Focus group participants were all female, bar one male and ranged in age and experience. The focus group interview was recorded and transcribed in line with educational research ethical considerations (Kenny, 2008) and common responses to themes were identified. The responses fell into four main categories: a discussion of the role/purpose of adult education, changes in the landscape, a discussion concerning the EGFSN policy document and the agenda that’s driving adult education provision in Ireland. I will illustrate each in turn.
The focus group speaks

Purpose/role of adult education
When asked about the main purpose of adult education, the overwhelming response was related to personal and community development. Adult Education was seen for personal development, citizenship and democracy as well as the knowledge economy.

… the purpose from my perspective would be that Adult Education is not just about acquiring skills and knowledge and new information it is about developing the adults as people so that they can take their place and play a role in the wider scheme of things. (Participant 2)

On a wider level I suppose participative democracy from a Literacy point of view can never fully be attained without, eh, you know, people going through a very holistic and wide education and whole experience. (Participant 1)

it could be just about helping develop something in a community and helping aiding the whole development of social capital and that could be one of the main purposes of Adult Education. (Participant 3)

The experience of focus group participants is that the motivation for adult learners in participating in adult education is not economically driven. While focus group participants did note that some adult learners might wish to gain a qualification for a specific career path this was not the primary reason for returning to education. Indeed when adult learners return to education to gain a qualification, it was to fulfil a deep felt need in terms of one’s own personal development and in taking one’s place in society.

It is not so much the reason that brings someone but the underline reason to that is that it is always a deeply felt need and it is something that they feel here in their heart. (Participant 1)

it is a personal achievement what ever level that achievement may be but particularly with the Leaving Certificate that it is something at the back of their minds for years that a seed has been planted there and they just want to achieve that particular qualification. (Participant 4)

In communities, you might have one or two people that feel that they just need something that they want to get together, they want to get to know their neighbours so they would be the spur, so they would be the people that might say ‘well okay, I'll gather together a group because I want to play a role in my community or because I want to get to know my neighbours or I want to have something to do one night a week’. (Participant 3)
Participants spoke of adult education as communicative spaces for reflection, education and action. Some were very vocal in their recognition of capacity building as an outcome of participating in adult education.

I was at an event this morning where a women’s group who started ten years ago by doing a community education course and now they are just so far, like doing education courses now is just a very small part of what they have become and like as one of them said to me ‘like ten years ago’ she said like ‘I would have sat here and I wouldn’t have opened my mouth’, she said ‘but after a couple of years I suddenly found myself and asking myself afterwards, putting my hand up and volunteering to talk in public and volunteering to do things’ (Participant 3)

One participant spoke about adult education as a safe haven in providing space to share and celebrate a cultural identity.

….their motivation for coming in to the (Traveller Training) Centre I think is that a lot of is with a lot of them, is that it is a safe place. They can come in during the day and they feel safe, they meet people who are the same as themselves. .. they are able to celebrate their own sort of life style and culture. (Participant 2)

Changes in the adult education landscape

Most of the discussion centred on the whole area of measurement. Fundamentally participants had issues with the whole concept of measurement, in terms of how adult success is measured.

I think there is a conflict there with regards to Adult Education in that ...the most important parts of it are the bits that are unquantifiable that are not measurable ... and (the parts) that are perhaps most highly valued by myself and with the course that we run are the development of independence and self reliance and the independence of being able to learn on their own and to take their own place in society. (Participant 2) there has been a tightening and it is even going to get tighter in reporting criteria, whereas before in community education it was a much move relaxed now suddenly we are being asked to pigeon hole people in to, ‘are they in a disability group?, are they this group, are they that group? Are they this age category? Are they that age category? Whereas before you didn’t have that and that was one of the good things about community education that people came from every walk of life…. that helped as I say build communities because you could sit on your chair and you could do your crafts or your painting and it didn’t make a difference you know who you were or what background you were from. (Participant 3)

Discussion concerning the EGFSN policy document
A robust discussion on the EGFSN (*Towards a National Skills Strategy*) took place. Focus group participants were critical in what they viewed as a prescriptive approach to education and employment targets.

I don’t view it in a very positive manner, I feel that it is very prescriptive you know it certainly targets the areas that the government are prepared to invest in and the areas where they see that we need more people qualified and at the levels that we need them qualified. (Participant 1)

Concern was raised in terms of social justice and equity and in terms of reinforcing role and class structures

I think the whole thing is quite worrying to be honest because it doesn’t really address the marginalized groups and it is the marginalized groups really that need the help and the support and much more so than the mainstream. I would be concerned about how marginalized groups could become more marginalized. (Participant 2)

My fear certainly with it is that a lot of the individuals that I have coming in to the Adult Learning Scheme (literacy scheme) are the individuals who will lose out within this kind of vision of a knowledge economy which they are not able to buy in to at the moment because their initial schooling for whatever reason hasn’t brought them to the level where they can be part of this knowledge economy. (Participant 1)

Adult Education is all about adults making informed choice but not about adults being almost whipped in to doing this…. Some of the people that are doing those courses are forced to be there and at the end of the day they are probably not learning much (Participant 3)

**Agenda driving Adult Education**

Focus group participants articulated what they saw as an neo-liberal, economic trajectory within contemporary Irish adult education, being lead by the European Union.

I suppose they are looking at our European counterparts in that as well. I think that is what they are doing, they are looking what suitting another country and why can’t we reach the target that is there. (Participant 5)

I think it is an economic agenda and it is a political agenda you know, it is about making sure that there is this high skilled labour force that is going to attract whatever industries, it is about saying we have this prepared labour force but I really don’t think that it is about looking at what communities need you know it is about meeting targets and agendas and you know whipping people in to shape to some degree. (Participant 3)

I feel that a lot of the changes that are coming are to meet European standards and you know policy directives and so on and so forth so that
politicised Ireland appears in a good light, as to whether we are genuinely engaging with it or whether from a policy angle point of view, whether, it is a question of form filling …I don’t know how genuinely people can engage with all of them (changes) at the same time….. (Participant 1)

Discussion of focus group
Fleming’s (2004) argument that many adult educators operate at the uncomfortable interface between the system world and the community resonated with many focus group participants, their discomfort arose out of a feeling of serving two masters; the meeting of a social vision for adult education juxta-positioned with being seen as the ‘midwife’ for economic competitiveness.

Laing’s notion of ‘ontological security’ (cited in Tomlinson) having a sense of the stability of the human being in relation to the natural and created world resonated with focus group participants. Habermass’ concepts of the system world and the life-world were alluded to by focus group participants. The life-world where individuals create their identity, values and meanings is being threatened by the system world that places the market and state as the driver of the adult education agenda. In some cases, the adult education world is being colonised by rules and curricula that often diminish possibilities for social capital (Walters, 1979).

The findings also support Hacking’s (1991) claims that the bureaucracy of statistics imposes not just by administrative rulings but by determining classifications within which people think of themselves and of the actions that are open to them (1999, pp.194). Lynch (1989) contends that the focus on preparing people is to service the economy, education is embedded in the practice of selecting and ordering students for the labour market and Lynch argues that this focuses learners on self-centred individual achievement which undermines their care for others. Indeed to be mindful of what Lynch et als (2007) describes as the neglect of education for emotional work, was echoed in focus group responses.

Conclusion
‘Who dares to speak?’
We are in the midst of a struggle for the heart and soul of adult education. Current policy direction in Ireland raises fundamental questions about commitment to the social vision of adult education in promoting a critical and learning agenda for active citizenship. If one considers education as nothing else other than an investment in human capital, we express a one dimensional perspective in the system world. The problem with this reductionist view of education is that is contradictory to what social purpose adult education is about.
It is a lonely place in the wilderness of social purpose adult education in Ireland. It appears to be out of fashion to talk about learning for living as opposed to learning for a living, particularly in these economically challenging times. And yet social purpose adult education in quite comfortable in charting the contested waters of the various traditions within adult education. So you might ask, ‘what is the problem?’

The problem is not even ‘who speaks?’ but ‘who is heard?’ The dominant voice that is heard is one that appears to take a utilitarian approach to adult education. This paper arose out of my sense of disquiet as an adult educator and researcher in the neo-liberal direction that ‘politically-speak’ is taking. I wondered where is the adult educators voice in the discourse? We need to reclaim the discourse of adult education and get beyond the rhetoric of politics and starting questioning ‘Who speaks?’ and indeed daring to speak ourselves.

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References
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