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Employability, Student Engagement via Dis Engagement with Knowledge

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ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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Abstract

I grew up in an educational environment that did not 'let me speak'. My learning world from the age of four until seventeen was a place of fear, control and a place where no questions could be asked. Yet on the other hand I was in an educational sphere that taught me well. That offered a 'safe' place where I could engage with knowledge, morality and 'read' books for pleasure as well as the drive for increased knowledge (Stock, 2005).

As a learner in my space between the 1950s and 1970s there was never a question of a female 'like me' becoming an academic, employable and having a self-identity. My future was as a mother, daughter and wife (Cahill, 2003). By strength and determination I changed my path to teaching: KYRIE ELEISON/CHRISTIE ELEISON : my silent chants and prayers heard or perhaps I just realised my potential self? I now teach in a space that is open, fluid and equal. That embraces freedom of speech, academic freedom and human issues. The classroom develops the 'whole' person and offers opportunity for them to engage in the classroom rather than dis-engage and the opportunity to identify with self identity, possible self and see the potential self.

Education, Education, Education, was the heralding cry of the Blair government of 1997 (Blair, 1998). It was at this moment in time that I reflected on my education having just graduated at the tender age of 42 and having made the decision to teach. I would never leave the educational space it was and still is an essential part of my self-identity. I specifically knew that I wanted to teach, I have always firmly believed teaching is a 'vocation' (Irvine cited in Tullock, 2008:17-19). Did I expect my Catholic education to pre prepare me for the employment, ready packaged, yes I did? In my early years I did not think about how the school guided me in relation to 'being human' and ensuring I had a human touch, a sense of reason.[1]

Miller (2006:4) succinctly encapsulates the Catholic school philosophy arguing, that it is not a factory producing replicas for businesses and industry. Miller (ibid: 4) further argues that Catholic education is not a product that that has a shelf life. The Catholic school ethos is about preparing the human person (Stock, 2005).

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[1]Cardinal Allen School which I attend in has the following listed in its School Foundation Statement, "...the formulation framework will prepare individuals for life in the 21st century: an integral education of the human person through a clear education of which Christ is the foundation" (Catechesi Tradendae, Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul 1, 16th October 1979, 21.).

Positioning Self

I have been a teacher within Higher Education for 16 years and have taught in numerous subject areas related to my discipline. In 2011 a change came for me within my teaching space and I shifted from the safe boundaries of traditional sociology to teaching Religion. Having the opportunity to teach in a subject discipline so intrinsically linked to my everyday life was a gift but at the same time also a challenge. If someone had told me at seventeen years old in 1973, that 39 years later I would be a teacher and especially within religion I would have said 'impossible' and incongruous. Arguably, because I could never have envisaged in the 20th century that some like me would enter the echelons of teaching, a female, wife, mother and Catholic (Cahill 2003 :3). In the case of this work it is imperative that I highlight my religion as it is part of myself identity and potential- self (Stock, 2005)
The shift of discipline meant that I needed to re-start, re-ignite my learning again. What better way to do this than to go back to my early days of learning and knowledge base, to resurrect subject knowledge that essentially had lain dormant for decades.

Self Identity, Curriculum and Employment

In choosing three words for this paper, I carefully thought about how I had felt in the past, my distant memories of schooling from 1959 until early 1970s which lead me to reflectively choose these words. Self identity, Curriculum and Employment. The words seemed important for the abstract. Throughout my adult life I looked at how little my school experience had given me – the negatives far outweighed any positives. I have long felt that I had no self-identity and was merely a 'prepared product' of my Catholic school life and the role that was assigned to me within the family and community/religious community. A female who easily took on assumed and given roles passively.
The word curriculum was an easy choice and one that I use almost every day especially over the last two decades since I have been involved and embroiled in higher education both as a learner, teacher and researcher. As a word in my school life the curriculum meant nothing to me. I could not see how the subjects I studied which may emphatically add at the time of my education choice, was not an option in choosing what I would study.
I could not realistically see what I was studying would change, influence or develop me as an individual and prepare me for the role I was set to have from at least eighteen that of wife, a mother and homemaker. In 2012 the curriculum I offer ensures that these roles can still be part of self-identity but also ensures it is coherently structured to ensure students, appreciate the knowledge, grasp and understand their skills and nominally that understanding of subjects will contribute to their opportunities and inclusion in a modern globalised world : they can have both.
Finally, the word employment. When I left school the word did not enter my consciousness and was far removed from any self identity. I would not need to be employed would I? Nominally, I would assume the stereotypical, designated role, wife, mother, and homemaker and of course a good daughter. How easily at this early age did I accept the dominant stereotypical 'norms' of the female, nurturing, selfless, emotionally sensitive and caring open to needs of others rather than self (ibid : 3). In

2012, employment is at the 'core' of my self identity.

Within my early academic experience(s) I struggled to conceptualise my academic identity with self identity, as a young and somewhat naive learner I could not see how the two inextricably linked together. Instead of embracing with what I now see reflectively as a positive learning space which guided me both academically, morally, spiritually, socially and ensured I had the opportunity to be a 'whole person' armed with resources driven by a 'common good'(Grace, 2002). I now see that while the school arena did not arm me with cultural capital in its institutional state, such as educational qualifications, it did arm me with the cultural capital of permanent disputation of habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). I would also suggest that I also possess a stock of social capital in the form of social networks, family and neighbours and a contingency of other key connections which arguably benefit me on an everyday level (Coleman, 1988b). Portes & Landolt (1996) argue that essentially being part of a community ensures security and enhances community benefits by the fundamental advantage of membership. Being part of a knowing community has ensured that I have community security and support by virtue of membership in my community of practice, within the workplace but essentially within my 'home' community (Pugh & Telhaj, 2007).

Additionally, I am trustworthy, reliable, honest and effective, all forms of informal values or norms which in essence forms social capital (Fukuyma, 1997; 1999; 2001). It would seem then I had employability skills, but these were not conceptualised in this period. So as I left the school space, I had cultural capital, social capital and human capital surely that was enough? No, Beck (1992), suggests that finishing school is not in itself enough, other key reserves are required, appearance, networks and communication skills to name a few, `extrafunctional'criteria of belonging to social networks benefits for employment marketplace. And so we begin, I left school 'unwhole' and returned decades later to become 'a whole person' in the educational sense to develop 'employable self'. I contended in the précis that I had an educational environment that did not let me speak; objectively I now see this was not the reality. Nominally, I conveyed that my classroom is far more open and engaging and while I still believe this to be the case perhaps it is not that dissimilar from my classroom within my Catholic school. The difference in my classroom is that it is a learning centred classroom and learning is differentiated, interactive and co created, thereby building trust and reciprocation as well as essential skills.

Setting the Scene

In positioning self identity it is important to be aware of self knowledge and how we position our understanding of the past. In my reflection of education I am drawing on the private self who consists of my individual memories of childhood and the school space. My memories and experiences are perhaps selective, sporadically inventive yet pertinently there must be some grain of truth omnipresent : my personal version and journey of childhood? Remember my memory, now highly selective and occasionally inventive (Cahill 2003: 4). In drawing the picture of self-identity which frames this work is necessary to look through the 'lens' and reflect on the family; the school and my cohesive community.

As a child I was brought up in a small, safe, religious community which had no walls dividing the family, the community neighbourhood or the school for all existed in a tri

dimensional form, supporting all and offering a strong community ties, social capital and bridging capital (Coleman, 1989b).

The family, community and school framed my being and existence and from an early age imbued my ideas of selfhood and expected norms of behaviours were indelibly linked to how I lived my life on an everyday level. In our house our father was the 'head' of the family and from an early age I conceded to the controlling power relations, male over female, my father controlled with a rod of iron with an unquestionable right.

This given right has never changed, yet now I understand it was about trust. At one level there was the care and protection of the child, the protective parent and at the extreme the discipline and punishment (McAlister et al 2009). This should not be taken lightly. In the early 1950s and 1960s Catholic childhood in the home environment operated between being parochial, and at times oppressive, fearful and yet it was also loving, spiritual, tender and hopeful, strange dichotomies (Carhill 2003:4). My socialisation would later shift from the home and continue in the school and church space, and both institutions operated as places of power and control (McAlister et al 2009 op.cit.). I attended Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Primary School which was only a few minutes' walk away from my home. So etched in my memory is my school experience that I can remember tagging along behind my elder sisters. The sibling safety and bonding which was full of protectionisms ensured I felt safe as I encountered a space which was so alien from my family environment at the tender age of four. I loved the school encounter, the learning experience and the teachers' knowledge was insurmountable although I did not see to what level in these early years. I tried to remember my curriculum at primary school and how it was structured for my learning and teaching experience. I know I studied Mathmatics, English, and History. The dominant and most influential part of my everyday school experience was my religious instruction the teaching of my priest. This teaching never had a set time. The priest would come into school every day, walking from the church to the school which walking slowly would have taken a few minutes.

The role of the priest in my curriculum in these early years was instrumental to my development and growth as a person and my sense of reason. In catholic schools during this time there was not an allocation of 10% of curriculum time as there is within today school's curriculum(McKinney2007:140).

McKinney (ibid: 140) argues, the 'Catholic school has a dual: the academic and life skills . and the religious faith formation of schooling'. Groome, (1998) elaborates on the characteristics of Catholicism and its drive for the common good, the emphasis on `sacramentality' of life, importance of community values, relationships, self values and social justice. Fundamentally, Catholic schools were established to educate children within a Catholic education context and it is imperative to understand the internal purpose, aim and effectiveness of the Catholic school which has stayed solid over time (O'Keefe & a O'Keefe, 1996).

Without knowing these were my future employability skills, it is just that they are not those one would usually see and acknowledge.

The priest would come in every morning for prayers, catechism and
 storytelling. The story telling of course was centred on the gospels but the stories were told in a way that as children we would grasp and understand (Stock, 2005). Although, Grace (2003: 140-149) suggests that Catholic schools based on Gospel values, present a challenge to society especially in post 9/11 world order in which

there is an omnipresent 'backlash' against certain faith communities. However, McKinney (2007:68) conspires that supporters of catholic schools, emphasise the importance of catholic schools in the wider social and moral arena (stability and moral order?).

For me the Catholic school provided a moral/faith formation which I now embody within my teaching.1 From my personal position I had no concept that my priest was a theologian or that from a very early age theology was part of my curriculum and in later years would inform my teaching and ultimately my employability skills. As young learners we formed a 'community of learning' (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The experience of sitting quietly in this space 'you did not speak', I am certain gave me the skills of listening and help me in my inductive and concrete thinking, and the ability to follow indirect and detailed arguments, employability skills at this tender age ?(Phoenix cited in Claire 2004: 33).

As I progressed to high school the role of my priest did not diminish in my education and religious instruction still dominated the curriculum.

Although, I had a more structured curriculum offering a relevant percentage of time to other subjects the main focus was still religious and at this time it was not a diverse religious curriculum and focused on the Catholic faith only, this would change in later decades.

In the case of the curriculum I saw it as intangible, to disconnected from human needs and principles, to divorced from practical relevance of everyday life (Pachter, 2004 cited in Claire 2004). Then and to a certain degree now the masculine labelled subjects Mathematics and Science which seemed so distant for the humanist learning I wanted to engage with still dominate the current curriculum throughout compulsory education. In my naive and gendered identity such a male subjected dominated curriculum subjects would hardly be of use to me. Yet, now in my everyday working world Mathematics are key for my role and as a social scientist I use some form of scientific inquiry (Smythe, 2007).

Conversation with the Canon
I recently met with my priest Father Dakin, now Reverend Canon. He has stayed in my life, though on the periphery. In conversation I asked him how he saw those early years of religious instruction within the school space.

I also questioned if prior to set curriculum development (mid 1980s) was there any focus on how the Catholic School curriculum would link into future employment for pupils or if this was not part of the ethos of the time.

Face to Face: Dialogue with the Revered Canon Dakin
In the 1960s and early 1970s the priest had relative autonomy within the classroom and essentially had the freedom to come and go. There was no set curriculum which meant you must stay within timeframes, for example one hour for religious instruction; one hour for maths. This meant that the religious instruction could be at the fore(Claire, 2004).Schools follow a set curriculum and are subject to the normal cycle of inspections to ensure compliance with government policies, also religious

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[1] The School Foundation Statement for Cardinal Allen (my old school) states that "The School willingly accepts its responsibility to provide the formation of each person in the community ...integrating human development and the values of Christ(http://cardinalallen.lancs.sch.uk/contact us.php

education and the religious life of schools is inspected by diocesan inspectors –so freedom is restricted.

The set curriculum, set timetable meant a move away from informal teaching, creativity and storytelling style learning to a structured and time approach. The curriculum from the late 1970s onwards maintained that at all levels curriculum structure and a degree of uniformity. In the case of the local Catholic grammar schools the set curriculum meant quite severe change. In the Catholic Grammar schools the Christian brothers were not willing to change and the grammar schools closed.

In the case of Catholic Convent schools, the nuns were more willing to change and slowly a more diverse religious 'education' was introduced.[1]From my position as a Catholic priest entering Catholic schools in the late 1970s to teach religious instruction following a set curriculum, there seemed so little time for religious instruction I felt 'timed-out' and worried in case I ran into other lessons timeframes.[2]

Additionally, with the changes in Catholic schools this meant that the `closeness` in some way ended a kind of loss of a community. Initially, when going into school(s) you knew everyone, the close and perhaps insular communities. I had taught, grandparents, aunts, uncles, parents and their children, there existed a knowing community. A community with strong ties and virtues of social inclusion. Importantly, in the early days of my priesthood there was a psychological sense of community which I felt totally part of, immersed into and valued. The local community built skills, developed skills, and enhanced future employability in a competitive marketplace definitely for young people. In essence, there was community support at so many levels. In 1950s - 1970s period and employability and aspirations and suggestively the opportunity of university life. I do not believe this was on the agenda of the majority of young people, males or females within the Catholic school environment in the early days, even those who went to the Catholic grammar schools. I do not think it was due to narrow curriculums but more related to family life and expected social norms within the communities.

The males took up positions in local employment and the females stayed at home. It was not until the late 1980-s that I noticed a change and the children I had baptised in the early 1970s started focusing on their education. There was a shift and aspirations of successful and skilled employment became at the   7

core of the young people from the local community and leaving home for university became the accepted and expected norm, and with this slowly the very close community became fragmented and ceased to be as 'one'.

Sociological Reflection

I sensed in the Canons words sadness at the loss of community. He spoke candidly about the loss of belonging and how 'others' had become part of the exiting community, and it seemed less bonded. The friendliness, the identity and commonality ceasing to be known and comfortable. In a sense the 'ontological security' has gone and with it safety of place, a community of social networks which

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[1] Notice the shift in language from religious instruction to religious education?

[2] Trish Byrne-Roberts, 2012. Face to Face Conversation with Rev Canon Thomas Dakin 2012. At Nicholas Own Roman Catholic Church. Diocese of Lancaster. England. Note: Canon Thomas Dakin born in 1926: Lancaster.UK. He studied at Upholland and the Ven English College Rome. He was ordained in 1951.

shelters you from harm and gives you a psychological home (Noddings, 1995).
Interpreting the Canons words it would seem that he longed for the past and a sense feeling and belonging.
A community that existed where members mattered to each other and to the group and essentially this in the Canons memories also meant the importance of a shared faith and commitment to the 'common good' (McMillan & Chavis 1986). In this sense a solid geographical community base had ceased to be a collective community of neighbouring and caring society where people care (Coleman, 1988a).

Times of Change?

In 2012, the Catholic school high school I attended ensures a comprehensive, structured and objective curriculum (Jeffers: 2011: 61). It fully endorses an innovative, creative broad and holistic educational experience that promotes maturity and greater responsibility in students for their learning and decision making (Ireland, Department of Education 1993: 3). The aims of the school include increased social consciousness and social competence with education through experience of understanding 'self identity' part of their growth and as a basis for personal development and maturity. Additionally, the school seeks to encourage students to recognise and realise their talents, capabilities and abilities which will guide their transition to further education, training or employment and sustain the strong foundations for their future and the communities they are part of (Jeffers, op.cit.). Traditionally the aim of the Catholic school has always been to educate the 'whole person' a focus on Christian values although pre 1970s suggestively a lack of diversity of cultures addressed (Savita, 2008).
The Catholic school engenders a climate of shared respect, trust, accountability responsibility and helps students to develop a sense of cohesiveness now as in the past it has its goals of nurturing and guiding but perhaps with more flexibility and less control ensuring freedom for growth and expression (Groome,1998).
In today's educational space, learning and teaching environment, in the main I would argue curriculum design in flexible, inclusive and responsive to student needs, both internally and externally.
In essence, the curriculum design is receptive to the student's enrichment and makes strong connections with subject discipline, student's needs and the core needs of the employment marketplace, and it provides flexible and comprehensive pathways for students. In my classroom space I ensure that there is a range of skills embedded within the curriculum that enables people to perform effectively in the workplace and contribute as members of their communities (Cantle, 2001).
Embedded within the curriculum is innovation, collaboration, problem solving, self-direction and a capacity to relate to others in different cultural contexts and to manage change – all key employability skills (Byrne-Roberts, 2011). The transformation of schools and universities into learning communities can only function if the ways in which students and teachers engage with learning and culture circles in which the voices of and experiences of learners are heard and valued, a shift from my 'silent' school day (Allman, 1987).
To do this, teachers need to listen carefully to what pupils; students have to say about teaching, and learning in their educational space (McKinney, 2007).
I contended in the précis that I had an educational environment that did not let me

speak; objectively I now see this was not the reality. Nominally, I conveyed that my classroom is far more open and engaging and while I still believe this to be the case perhaps it is not that dissimilar from my classroom within my catholic school. The difference in my classroom is that it is learning centred classroom and the learning experience is co-created in a similar way to my early primary school day's experience of learning in a safe circle but with the opportunity for student 'voice'. Learners can make connections about the knowledge they acquire in the classroom and how they can apply in the world of work and their everyday lives. In my educational experience this message was not clearly transferred, meaning that I could not see links for the future -employable –self, how times change! I am pleased that I went to a Catholic school which is also the *'cry'* from my Catholic friends who attended Catholic schools especially between the 1950s and 1970s, who although may have been taught by priests and nuns who may have 'ruled' with a rod of iron, their ultimate aim was to prepare us for life in what they believed was the best way.

And strangely enough all of those involved in my research are now teachers in Religious Education.

Initially, the aim of this work was to endeavour to understand my academic identity, to establish how my Catholic school had arguably restricted my employability in the marketplace. I now reflect on my original discourse position. Conversely, from a repudiator position I also question that the education system closed the *'heavy door'* nominally I did, but not with intent perhaps with naivety. My educational learning experience was 'learning centred'. It was underpinned by the expectations that all students would succeed although, perhaps not responsive to the different ways that students achieve their best. The classroom like me was a product of its time I therefore draw back from my original argument.

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