

THE COMMUNIVERSITY: A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGED ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The Communiversity is an adult education intervention targeting people experiencing 'exclusion' not only from a socio-economic stand point but also in terms of age, mental health, addiction recovery, disability and other forms of marginalisation. It is a three-way partnership between Maynooth University (MU), community based organisations in the form of Local Development Companies and the Public Library Service. This article will emphasise the importance of higher education partnership arrangements with like-minded organisations who can deliver value for money within the public sector by pooling resources and sharing services to promote the aim of community engaged lifelong learning. It will also consider threats to the initiative in terms of insecure funding and 'special' status outside the mainstream of skills acquisition and job readiness that lifelong learning education budgets are weighted towards.

INTRODUCTION

The Communiversity is a three-way partnership established in the Republic of Ireland in 2012 between the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) in Maynooth University, community-based organisations in the form of Local Development Companies (LDC) and Local LEADER Partnership Companies and the public library service. For each partner there are particular policy demands that come under the general headings of social inclusion, widening participation, community development and capacity building. These policy demands are contained in a number of different reports such as Our Public Libraries: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities pertaining to the libraries; for the university, The National Higher Education Strategy to 2030 is relevant; and for community-based partners, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) applies. These policies converge through the goal of promoting education as a way to engage individuals and communities with these public sector services. For the individual, the Communiversity offers a testing ground by introducing them to academic subjects and, even more importantly, to academics as neighbours and citizens with the same concerns as the participants. Some people have progressed to formal further and higher education from the Communiversity, so it can be used as a pre-access gateway. Others have become involved in their local communities through volunteering or re-entering the workforce. All have found it a way to connect with other people and socialise. The three-way partnership between the university, community partners and local libraries is a model of best practice for shared

services by publicly funded bodies. Although it has been quite a successful initiative, it still suffers from drawbacks common to all such 'special projects' – precarious funding (LDCs fund the programme from different education or social inclusion budgets) and overreliance on committed individuals as drivers (Estabrook, 1979 cited in Killacky, 1983, p. 57).

The idea for the Communiversity developed out of necessity brought on by the economic crash of 2008 and the ensuing years of austerity. Those sections of society hardest hit, so called 'areas of disadvantage', were those that heavily relied upon the services of Local Development Companies. The LDCs implement community development programmes on behalf of the state for social inclusion, education and employment schemes. As public services were cut or curtailed, the possibility of a community based lifelong learning initiative that went beyond labour market activation seemed remote. The agenda for lifelong learning was now being set by the Department of Education and 'Skills' as it had recently been re-designated. Job readiness and skills-based training was to take precedence over all other forms of adult education. In late 2011, DACE and the Library Council of Ireland approached the relevant government department with evidence suggesting a good level of interest for courses in the arts and social sciences beyond strict economic concern. A small amount of seed funding was allocated and two pilot schemes, one in a rural location and one in an urban library, were established in February 2012. These MU Library initiatives became the forerunner of the Communiversity which has been operating in various locations across Ireland ever since.

How It Works:

- The venue, usually a local library, is a familiar and welcoming space and less daunting for adult learners encountering HE for the first time than a university campus.
- A prologue 'taster session' for the general public allows those interested to gain a better understanding of programme content and structure. The 'taster' also includes a speed-dating exercise and a round of introductions that sets the tone for the social nature of the programme. It also allows the community partners to recruit from the attendees.
- The following week, the programme proper starts with a local history module. The intention here is to create the space for the participants to share their local knowledge. By the end of the four weeks of local history, the dialogic nature of the course has been set and more abstract modules can be introduced, e.g., psychology, economics, politics, philosophy, media studies, classics, criminology, etc. Most importantly, the participants have found their voice.
- It is free of charge to the user.

The selection of quotes used in the rest of this paper are taken from research into the Communiversity carried out in 2018 (Barter and Hyland, 2020) through focus groups, telephone interviews and a survey questionnaire.

A NEW BEGINNING AND THE DIALOGICAL APPROACH CONSIDERING THE WIDER IMPACT WITHIN THE COMMUNITY.

For all of us in this room going to college wasn't an option it just wouldn't occur to you. It just wasn't an option, the economics of things. We all worked from when we were very young even part-time jobs. I handed up money at home when I was 11 years of age to my mother. I never thought that I would be going to college at 63. (laughs) I am 65 now so I started college at 63 which is two years ago. It was a great thing and even to go up to Maynooth [university] (participant focus group 1).

The use of libraries as spaces for adult and community education is not new. Killacky (1983) refers back to the early nineteenth century and their use as 'community learning centers [sic]' in the US and this has continued in various guises to this time (p. 51). It is also fairly widespread. Wherever there is a public libraries network there seems to be a natural inclination to use them for community education and lifelong learning (Astbury, 1994; Benseman, 2006; Lantham, 2000). The Communiversity is therefore not unique in that sense. However, what appears to be different, at least in the Irish context, is the combination of three public services that offer a wraparound social and educational intervention. The community sector in Ireland, although somewhat diminished since the economic crash, is still quite strong, and LDCs and LEADER Partnership companies have the specific remit to target the hardest to reach and most underserved. As libraries reimagine themselves for the 21st century they continue to be regarded by the public as a 'trusted' service. They are safe spaces for learning. 'The setting of the course was excellent and took the intimidation out of education as everyone was already familiar with the library' (participant from focus group 2). This theme is continued in the following:

It was so much more than just education. I had a lot of anxiety, so it was a great place to find out what a learning environment would be like. I felt so good about myself and I felt that I was a good influence on the class... I was full of fears and they just gave me the confidence to go back to education (participant focus group 1).

University campuses heighten anxiety for adult learners where feelings of 'imposter syndrome' can be very strong (Chapman, 2017, pp. 112-119). This is where access programmes often fail. In the rush to prove inclusivity and meet mature student admission or other key performance indicators for lifelong learning targets, the slowness and messiness of 'people work' can get lost or overlooked in the urge to be impactful. Not every intervention has to have a seismic impact; the ripple effect can also produce results:

People who organised this course I doubt that they realised the ripple effect that it was going to have. I have a son who is a secondary school teacher and he talks about this course when he is teaching the kids in school and I think that this course definitely needs to go on. My wife wants to do it next year because I talk about it so much. (participant focus group 1)

This participant used his/her learning from the Communiversity to teach others:

I gave a 'class' to my grandparents group about looking up family history and did up some notes as well as doing a slide show showing how to follow notes as some of the members would not be very familiar with computers.

Engagement on more than a superficial level takes time and effort. However, it is obvious from the last quote above that it can be empowering. The do-it-yourself agentic attitude is encouraged. In one community, the participants even carried on without university involvement and brought in a local historian to continue the work to the point of collaborating with a college of further education to produce a multimedia exhibition based on oral history.

Within the discipline of adult education, agency and the dialogic process are central to all learning encounters. Learning is not merely about content acquisition but also about meaning making and creating and recreating new realities (Rule, 2004, p. 323). The Freirean approach of 'problem posing' education (Freire 1970, pp. 52-67) means that relevance of the subject comes to the fore.

It [the economics module] stirred me, it lit a fire underneath me. I understand consumerism, it made me want to become somebody in opposition. It gave me a place to vent about economics and it linked it to philosophy... (participant focus group 3).

This course proved very lively as many of the people taking part had been directly and indirectly affected by the banking collapse and housing market crash. Again, I was struck by the diversity of people taking part in the course, a former bank employee and a local politician attended that day, and a lively debate about what the future holds for Irish banking and housing followed the lecture (participant focus group 1).

The above quote highlights two issues that continue to be of real concern to citizens right across Europe – the aftershock of the global banking crash and its reverberating effects on the current housing crisis. If such concerns go unacknowledged, anger at perceived injustice can find expression in populist anti-democratic and reactionary forces. The aspiration for an active citizenship has been a European Union ideal for many years. Unless ‘activation’ is accompanied by some mechanism and a forum for critically thinking about the economic and social realities that we face daily, citizens remain open to persuasion by arguments generated by algorithms or worse. Brexit and the anti-vax movement spring to mind.

As well as being dialogic, the Communiversity promotes learning as a reflective process. It gives participants opportunities for self-directed learning to explore areas of interest as identified by themselves. Each tutor/lecturer encourages open discussion in the group which enables participants to develop their learning in terms of their own lifeworld/life-conditions (Kraus, 2015, p. 2). There was also a very strong feeling that the lecturers/tutors were benefitting from the exchanges that took place during the Communiversity. One participant reported:

We learnt a lot from the lecturers and the lecturers said that they learnt a lot from us. We all came back with a positive feeling that we would like to learn more (participant focus group 2).

This is echoed in feedback from a Communiversity economics lecturer:

There have been many memorable moments and each group is completely different. I have found my work with these groups to have been hugely rewarding and enjoyable...My work with Communiversity has enriched my life immensely.

PROGRESSION (LACK OF) FUNDING (INSECURE)

Through dialogue and discussion we begin to see a meeting of minds. What the Communiversity offers is a beginning. Its weakness is that it does not follow through and have easily accessible progression routes to engage further with formal education. The lack of links to further development was emphatically stated by a participant in focus group 3: ‘I just felt that at the end you were brought up to here and it was fantastic but the link at the end it just didn’t exist.’ A response to the survey showed how the Communiversity went some way to addressing educational deficits of participants, but was ultimately not enough to prepare for third level engagement:

The Communiversity could help us follow up certain subjects but it stops there. I would have liked the classes to go on, to have more. We got a taste for it and a thirst for it and we were just left thirsty. It gave us a great thirst for knowledge. There were other people in the Communiversity and they left because they felt that it was great to have the university learning but if they wanted to take the courses that they wouldn’t have the academic writing skills to attend university.

This and other evidence seems to suggest that the Communiversity is effective in getting (some) participants to think about attending higher education, but that there are some additional steps required to prepare a potential mature student for successful engagement in higher education. In an attempt to address this, the Communiversity Network made a submission to the consultation process for the new National Access Plan 2022-2028 that recommends increased pathways and funding structures to support lifelong learning (Barter et al., 2021).

As mentioned earlier, perhaps the greatest weakness is in the area of funding. Funding for the Communiversity relies too heavily on the community partner and their Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) budget. When reporting to the EU funders, key performance indicators for the LEADER Partnerships are heavily skewed in the area of those Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETS) and Labour Market Activation. It is only since late 2018 that people over the age of 64 have been counted in terms of interventions. Therefore, if the community partner needs to divert monies into other more pressing programmes, the Communiversity is one of the initiatives most at risk. In the current climate, funding for non-instrumentalist and non-credentialist programmes is more than likely going to be harder to come by. If this is indeed the case, it is a very short-sighted approach to long term and deeply entrenched societal issues. These include mental health and age related problems such as loneliness, isolation and depression. It is becoming increasingly apparent that local community engagement and social prescribing (Khan and Giurca et al., 2023) are meaningful and cost-effective ways to combat these ills.

CONCLUSION

The Communiversity shows what can be done when public institutions are enabled to work together to think more strategically and longer term. The initiative emerged out of a crisis, but the policies that allowed this partnership to develop had been written long before and came from a core set of values for social justice, inclusion and equality that are at the heart of public and community sector service. At a time when university metrics value research impact, grant and funding applications, the citation index and university rankings, the Communiversity recalls a pastoral dimension that is not easy to quantify. Herein lies its greatest weakness. The fuel that runs the Communiversity is the zeal of particular personnel from each of the partner organisations who are dedicated to widening participation, access and community engagement for critical thinking for the public good. These are key in any attempt to create a more democratic and egalitarian society, but this mission is often seen as idealistic and peripheral to a lifelong learning culture that has been colonised by credentialism and skills acquisition for the economy. When other demands to fulfil more 'productive' objectives towards employability and job readiness are made upon the staff involved in terms of time, resources or finances, the risk to the Communiversity's longevity becomes real. We face an anxious age of climate change, insecurity regarding migration caused by political upheaval or environmental destruction, the rise of Artificial Intelligence and uncertainty as to what this means for the human race and the more familiar horrors of war in Europe. The perennial societal ills of disadvantage, exclusion, loneliness and isolation in old age, depression, mental health issues and addiction will also be with us. In the face of these phenomena it is initiatives such as the Communiversity that will help people come together to think, talk, deliberate, care for and feel solidarity with one another. This aspect of lifelong learning is worth celebrating (and financing) just as much as labour market activation, skills acquisition and credentials. It is hoped that recognition for each of the partners from the recent funding success under the EU Europe for Citizens 'Foundations For Futures Europe Project' will be one way to secure and mainstream the Communiversity in the longer term and make it sustainable.

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