

## OCCUPY DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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### **Introduction**

On Wednesday, 25 January 2012 I walked past the Department of Finance on my way to a meeting to plan a development education (DE) training event. I was in a rush. When I saw the ten or twelve young people chained to the entrance of the Department, I smiled my support to them and hurried on; I was late for my meeting to plan a training that would engage young people in learning and action for a more just and sustainable world. Immediately, the juxtaposition struck me and I felt a strange combination of delight and shame; delight that this was happening and shame that I was not sitting beside them. How many of us have had a similar experience since the Occupy movement began last year?

As development educators, we are working hard to raise awareness of global justice issues, working through educational processes to empower and enable learners to become agents of change – to become active, engaged citizens. We are busily focused on our strategies and our objectives trying to prove the impact of our work, while an improbable activism explodes on the streets around us. Is this the result of years of development education work or has it happened despite DE? What does Occupy mean to us as development educators? What could it become? How can we relate to this curious and exciting phenomenon?

This article examines some challenges and opportunities that the Occupy Movement by its very presence raises for us as development educators. A number of assumptions underpin this article: that our current models of economic development are failing us and the rest of the world; that a deep shift in values and worldviews is urgently needed to enable us to make the transition to new models of development; and that education is central to this shift.

### **Development Education (DE) and Occupy: Challenges and Opportunities**

DE and the Occupy Movement share a common synergy built on their desire for action and change in the way the world works. Development educators seek to identify the root causes of poverty and inequality, encourage people to take a critical look at the world around them and take action to bring about a more just and equitable world. Historically, DE has had a focus on the

Third/Developing/Majority World or global South – namely the parts of the world most adversely affected by the development of the global North.

The Occupy Movement, like DE, asks questions concerning social justice and equality. It demands a redistribution of power and wealth from the 1 percent back to the 99 percent. Occupy has a particular focus on ending corporate greed and influence over democratic structures (New York City General Assembly, Sept 29 2011). It has sparked a debate about how decisions affecting our lives are made behind closed doors and how dominant fiscal and political systems in the world have failed us. The desire to address issues of injustice in our society is nothing new yet the realities of how and who experiences these issues are changing. The global economic recession of 2008 has impacted on millions of people across the world who never expected to be what Brother Kevin Crowley of the Dublin Capuchins describes as the ‘new poor’. A critical mass of citizens in the United States (US), where Occupy first emerged in September 2011, is beginning to comprehend the vast inequalities within their own society (Plutocracy Now, 2011). The initial protest camp, was prompted by a call from Adbusters, (a Canadian media activist group) to occupy the largest financial centre in North America, Wall Street in New York City. ([www.occupytogether.org/occupy-wall-st/](http://www.occupytogether.org/occupy-wall-st/)).

The first challenge to us as development educators relates to the historical origins of DE as an activity of non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs), raising awareness about the realities of the communities with which we work overseas. Awareness raising activities on poverty in the global South have supported NGOs’ fundraising efforts but have also helped to create public support for Ireland’s programme of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). Today, Irish Aid devotes a percentage of the ODA budget towards development education, the key aim of which is to inform the public and encourage them to be critically engaged with Ireland’s ODA programme (Irish Aid, 2007). Furthermore, Irish Aid expects a portion of the funding it gives to Irish NGDOs to be spent in Ireland on DE. Many Irish NGDOs, such as Trócaire, have always had a strong emphasis on DE and continue to do so. The increased investment in DE over the last twenty years is a considerable achievement for and tribute to the passionate educators and activists who began this work when there was no official funding (Bracken, Bryan and Fiedler, 2011). Today, many organisations that deliver DE are not NGDOs but recognise the value of embedding a global perspective in the education work that they do. However, critics argue that DE presently runs the risk of becoming de-politicised and detached from current local development issues as a result (Bryan, 2011).

This raises the first key challenge that Occupy presents to the DE sector, which is two-pronged. Firstly, how can we engage more effectively with local development issues? Secondly, how can we engage the public critically with both local and global development issues? These questions have been recently raised by NGDOs and educators alike. The fact remains that many people are unaware of what development education is. Why have the public not been more critically engaged with development and global justice? Why do so many people still feel that what happens ‘over there’ or ‘out there’ has nothing to do with their own lives? Recent research in the UK has highlighted the lack of progress since the mid-1980s in engaging the public critically in development (Finding Frames, 2010). Development NGOs are consequently seeking new and more meaningful ways to involve their donors and supporters in their work. Think Global, the UK-based DE organisation, analysed this research and proposed that ‘deliberative engagement’ was needed in classrooms to properly engage learners in the complexity of development (Hogg, 2011).

In issue 12 of *Policy and Practice*, Andy Storey (2011) criticised the blind spot that NGDOs have developed in relation to Ireland’s current economic crisis. This relates not only to DE work, but also the advocacy work of NGDOs. Did they not have first-hand experience of the damage wreaked by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) through its lending conditionalities and economic restructuring programmes in countries like Zambia? How could they not see this as an opportunity to apply their knowledge and experience of the global South to Ireland’s economic plight? Why have they not added their voice to the debate about Ireland’s relationship with the IMF? Arguably, these difficult questions create a divide between those doing DE in NGDOs and those whose DE practice is rooted in activism on particular issues like trade and debt.

As the global context of development changes it creates more reasons and opportunities for us as educators to strengthen the links between the local and global. Occupy is an opportunity to make this connection clear. Our understanding of development and progress, in Ireland and elsewhere, must evolve and be regarded as a shared responsibility if we are to generate sustainable means of moving forward as a society (Giri and Qarles Van Ufford, 2004: 20). The major challenges we face over the next ten years require responses on multiple levels: personal, local and global. These challenges are compounded by the increasing complexity and interdependence of our world, and our inability to devise appropriate ways of responding to this. Many NGDOs still rely on a linear model of cause and effect in their approach to development, a model that is not appropriate for all development challenges in today’s world (Green, 2008: Annex).

Climate change, to take one important example, is the key context which will shape, if not determine, what can be achieved in terms of development in the future (Trócaire, 2011: 12). However, despite knowledge of and expressions of urgency regarding climate change, there remains a concerning lack of decisive action at a global level on this issue. We are already feeling the consequences of climate chaos here in Ireland (floods, changing seasons, etc.) and we know it has been affecting poorer communities in Africa and Asia for years. The world urgently needs a rapid transition to low-energy ways of living based on a new understanding of progress and wellbeing. Moreover, the shifting power centres, from a rich North and poor South polarity to a multi-polar world with the growing BRIC economies of Brazil, China, India and Russia increasing their influence in global decision-making, requires new thinking in how we address global issues (Fiedler, 2011).

For countries like Ireland to reduce their consumption of fossil fuels and carbon emissions to the level required, we will need engaged and informed citizens. Duncan Green argues that what is needed are active citizens engaging with and co-creating effective states (Green, 2008). At an individual level, active citizenship means developing self-confidence and overcoming the insidious way in which powerlessness can become internalised. In relation to other people, it means developing the capacity to negotiate and influence decisions. And when empowered individuals work together, it means involvement in collective action at various levels of society. Ultimately, active citizenship means engaging with the political system to build an effective state and assuming some degree of responsibility for the public domain (Ibid: 19). Echoing one of Albert Einstein's renowned quotations, Etienne Wenger says:

"We cannot address today's challenges with yesterday's perspectives. We need new visions of what is possible. We need new models to learn how to learn at multiple levels of scale, from the personal to the global. Increasing our capacity to learn (individually and collectively) is taking on a special urgency if we see ourselves caught, as I believe we are, in a race between learning and the possibility of self-destruction" (Etienne Wenger, 2006).

An additional challenge, therefore, that Occupy presents to us as development educators is to rethink our theories of change. How does change happen, at a local, national and global level? When we think about attempts to enact 'top-down' global solutions to development challenges such as climate change, we see the disillusioning watering-down of promises and commitments. This makes it difficult to be optimistic that a binding agreement to lower

emissions will emerge from the United Nations (UN) Rio+20 meeting this year. In fact the lack of progress made by international institutions like the UN forces us to consider how do we scale up local solutions? As development educators, we often raise awareness about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of eight overarching global development goals that were agreed in 2000 and are due to be achieved by 2015. However, are these goals really tackling the root causes that perpetuate global poverty and inequality? How relevant or empowering are they to communities in the global South? As we engage more critically with proposed global solutions to our common challenges we seem to be struggling to resolve them, particularly with the expediency that is required. This challenges our understanding of leadership and questions the kind of leadership needed to make the transition to a sustainable, just and more equal world. It challenges us to distribute decision-making power about development back to communities themselves. Do we need individual superheroes to carry us into the new world or collaborative models of leadership that include all perspectives in forging a common path to the future?

### **What is Occupy?**

Occupy is a leaderless grassroots movement, that is based on local development and justice issues. It is also consciously a global movement, recognising other communities affected by similar injustices. These communities connect in solidarity with each other in horizontal lines of communication; there is no global headquarters or central command. It is therefore a truly a self-organising network that, in many ways, challenges traditional notions of where power lies and who we need to influence to access it.

What would be different about our work as development educators if we saw the world as a complex living system, in which even a small change can have a big impact? Rather than scaling solutions up we could we scale them across. Real learning is taking place in Occupy, learning that can be disseminated across to other communities using new communications tools. Social media, for example, enabled communities of resistance to mobilise themselves in the Arab Spring, with the wonderful result of protesting Egyptians buying pizza for picketing union workers in Wisconsin as an act of solidarity (Gawker, 2011). This immediate 'translocal' learning (community-to-community) using new technology is central to Occupy as a movement. Occupy seems to be a site for learning to learn our way out of self-destruction, as Etienne Wenger calls for in the quote above.

In *Walk Out, Walk On*, Deborah Frieze and Margaret Wheatley (2011) describe communities who have taken the bold step of walking out of the

systems that were failing them and walking on to create systems that worked for them. They describe a ‘Two Loop’ theory of change whereby people begin to walk out of a system as its unsustainability becomes increasingly apparent. These people meet and begin to walk on together to co-create and experiment, forging the way for a new system to emerge and replace the old. During this phase of change no-one knows how the new system will evolve. It is a phase of experimentation, struggle, failure and creativity. Often what the pioneers are doing is difficult to understand from the perspective of those who are still embedded in the old, dying system. As these networks develop, they evolve into communities of practice and eventually into systems that have influence.

Occupy is a movement that seeks to make a transition out of a failing system and into a new system that is viable. Those at the Occupy camp in Dublin and elsewhere have literally walked out of the spaces that have failed them. They are now co-creating this indefinable, mercurial, frustratingly slippery creature of a movement on our behalf. Who knows what Occupy is or could eventually become? But one thing that is certain is that the protestors have reclaimed a space on the streets and opened up a space in our imagination. If we enter this imaginative space, we can start to leave behind our assumptions and conditioning from the world that has failed us. We can begin to unlearn the ways of thinking that created our problems in the first place. Crucially, we can begin to relearn new ways of thinking that may lead us to solutions that are sustainable. We need this space, physically and imaginatively, to exist long enough for us to shed the old assumptions – it takes time, they are deeply embedded! – and begin to formulate new ways of seeing and being in the world.

### **Education and Action**

Another challenge that Occupy presents to us is the relationship between education and action in the DE experience. Where does the action element of DE occur? Is it after a learning process or is part of the learning process? Is it a linear model (education leading to action) or a spiral model (action/reflection – praxis)? Occupy resembles the popular education movements of Latin America, with their opportunities for assembly and discussion. Many Occupies, for example, run Occupy universities – ongoing talks, lectures and conversations about related topics.

Occupy is like a research laboratory for social change. When you enter the Occupy space you can see experimentation at work – new economic models such as gift culture and new ways of organising and relating to each other such as consensus-based decision-making. Occupy is demonstrating new societal models (Shareable, 2011) and though these models will not always work

perfectly – in fact, they may often fail and provoke criticism – we must embrace the possibility of failure in order to be creative and develop new paradigms (Robinson, 2010). Importantly, feedback loops exist in the Occupy camps that allow the camps and the broader movement to learn as it goes, to continually reflect and act and evolve, much like living systems do. What would our DE practice be like if we modelled it on a living cell?

The analogy of the ‘imaginal cell’ seems apt for Occupy. Imaginal cells are those that become active when a caterpillar dies and they continue to exist by eating the dying carcass of the caterpillar. They find each other and cluster together eventually reaching a critical mass. When this happens a dormant gene is awakened that triggers the metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly. Imaginal cells do not themselves know what the caterpillar will become, but they are compelled to assist transformation. They unlock the inner potential of this living being to renew itself (Cohen and Chopra, 2007). Educators cannot predict the result of facilitating a learning process with others but they need to approach the task with ‘mature innocence and creative commitment’ so that the solutions can emerge (Ibid). This is another challenge that Occupy presents to us: how do we see ourselves as educators? Are we heroes with the ‘right’ answers or hosts of a process of discovery for learners? Most development educators are passionate about the transformative methodologies that they use, which distinguishes DE from formal teaching. But, when is the right time for structured teaching with specific learning outcomes and when is the right time for learner-led discovery and experimentation?

### **Future Challenges**

Looking to the future, there are some key challenges and questions for us as development educators. How do we bring the conversations taking place at Occupy sites around the world from the protest camps into our own communities? There is a hunger to engage in authentic dialogue about the justice issues affecting our lives. While some people are more concerned with local issues because that is what they are ready to deal with, others understand that local issues are inextricably linked to global issues of debt, trade, environment, education and human rights; just some of the strands creating the web of connections we live in. How do we continue to walk out of the systems that have failed us and work collectively to create resilient ways of living? How do we use the sparks of the debate that has begun to light more fires, to ignite more powerful conversations and build a truly public forum for discussion and action? We are more interdependent and connected to the rest of the world

and its people than at any other time in history, when we shake our part of the web it will shake theirs too. Surely this is the right time to try something new?

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**Alan** and **Eimear** were part of a group of development educators and activists who hosted a series of World Café conversations at Occupy Dame Street in November 2011. The conversations explored the questions "What does Occupy mean to you?" and "What is the potential for Occupy?" You can read more about their experiences of this on their blogs. Both authors are writing

in an individual capacity and their views do not represent those of the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) or the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI).

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