

Perspectives for Christian educators with a learning community approach to parish learning, on revisiting the work of two exceptional educators, Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich.

By John Littleton. May 2020

Abstract

The author undertakes a review of a learning community approach to parish learning in light of revisiting the ‘worlds’ of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich near the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of their work. A learning community approach contextualised for the parish context is outlined. After recounting the living experience of these two exceptional educators, the paper discusses the insights gained from the work of Freire and Illich for educational practice, and makes a critique of a learning community approach. Three benefits for educational practice emerge from this evaluation: affirmation, reminders and the humanising intent of a learning community. These benefits are discussed. The benefits provide potentially effective educational perspectives with implications for parish learning today.

Key words: Review; Freire and Illich; learning community; congregation; parish learning.

Introduction

Fifty years-ago Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich were teaching, writing and influencing the world as exceptional educators; controversial and provocative as Christian thinkers from the Roman Catholic tradition. I read their books in the 1970’s and now revisit them. A Review Essay on Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Abbott and Badley 2020) prompted the writing of this paper. Illich’s *Deschooling Society* influenced my early vocation in teaching. Freire and Illich participated in conferences together in New York and Geneva (Freire 1992, loc 942, loc 1832) and were friends (Illich 1971, 26). Both travelled the world by invitation to share their reflections. Both explored the theme of learning to become fully human; a theme that informs a learning community approach. Freire’s work and Illich’s work remind Christian educators today to nurture a parish learning that humanises.

The learning question for the paper is: using Freire and Illich as conversation partners, what insights might be gained by Christian educators who apply a learning community approach to parish learning? In responding to the question, we learn about and come to appreciate Freire and Illich’s “knowledge of living experience” (Freire 1992).

During the listening period the paper uses a conversation method of reflection often used in Bible study; bringing three ‘worlds’ into dialogue. The first ‘world’ introduces the background of the authors; the second ‘world’ outlines a learning community approach, Freire’s and Illich’s educational theory and practice; the third ‘world’ addresses the issues, constructive suggestions and comments that arise as a result of reflection on the work of Freire and Illich.

Learning community approach customised to a parish context

This brief account provides background information on a learning community approach before publications by Freire and Illich are read through the lens of that approach to parish learning.

I stumbled across a learning community approach during a fourteen-year period of team ministry in the Anglican Parish of Glen Osmond, Adelaide. My writing on the congregation as learning community grew out of parish experience, reading and reflection. Gradually I became aware of the literature on learning communities which helped me interpret and articulate insights gained from parish ministry practice. This learning community approach in parishes confirmed my experience in and writing about ministry in Anglican parishes and built on the thinking and writing of others who also commended a learning community perspective to congregations. Authors, like Jack Seymour 1993, Thomas Hawkins 1997, Norma Cook Everist 2002, Barbara Fleischer 2006 and Thomas Groome 2011, wrote on the topic of learning communities for congregations.

For the purpose of this paper, a parish-based learning community, is defined as:

A visionary community of faith where leaders and members, while respecting a diversity of abilities and perspectives, practise holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective learning processes (Littleton 2017, 13-17; Littleton 2018). The word parish used in this paper also refers to a congregation or a faith community.

Through parish ministry experiences, I came to understand the discipline of Christian education differently through the lens of a learning community approach. The approach provided a way to structure parish ministry and mission around learning processes that fostered much growth in the Christian faith. It provided three criteria (holism, collaboration and theological reflection) by which to clarify any issues in relation to parish learning, and a lens through which to view and interpret educational situations. Small group activities used the three learning processes. The whole parish community would receive an educational ministry.

Holistic learning processes are present where there is a shared vision of the whole parish, which combines the five parts of parish learning available in an Anglican parish structure in South Australia: intentional individual learning, group learning, congregational learning, community engagement learning, and dialogical learning. *Collaborative learning processes* in parishes involve people in the sharing leadership in ministry and outreach responsibilities, when members work and learn together, enjoying and respecting the abilities and contributions of others in achieving a common task. *Theologically reflective learning processes* in parishes involve people in thinking and praying about their present life actions in the light of the biblical story and traditions, and then moving forward, renewed for future action (Littleton 2018, 3-4).

This learning community approach was used for the first time as a research framework on learning outcomes in my research project, 2013-2014, conducted in the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide. The findings from that research identified trends and patterns.

The definition of faith learning, pertinent for parish life, and offered in the research process, indicated that faith learning is a process of growing in the knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith in and through Jesus Christ. Growing in faith learning means

the degree to which participants in the research project reported that their knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith had grown or been enhanced.

The evidence-based research findings demonstrated that this learning community approach enhanced faith learning in parishes. Research participants in parish learning community environments reported very much growth in their knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith when the learning community processes were intentionally and fully used. Parish survey and focus group (six focus groups) findings showed a spectrum of responses from across the 29 parishes surveyed. The general trend across the spectrum of parishes indicated that the greater the presence of the learning community processes in a parish, the greater the likelihood that much growth and enhancement in faith learning would be reported, with a lesser presence of these processes tending to correlate with less growth and enhancement in faith learning. Parishes with multiple learning community characteristics reported a high degree of growth and enhancement in faith learning and vice versa. More detailed research findings are readily available (Littleton 2018).

Backgrounds, contexts and “living experience” of Freire and Illich

Paulo Freire, 1921-1997.

Born and educated in Recife, Brazil, Paulo Freire began working with adults who experienced illiteracy in 1947. He gradually evolved his education for liberation and humanisation in the 1960's. Until 1964 he was Professor of History and Philosophy of Education in the University of Recife. His methods were used in federal government literacy courses. After the 1964 coup in Brazil he went into exile in Chile where his methods were used. In 1970 he took up the post of special consultant in the Office of Education at the World Council of Churches, Geneva. He travelled the world and toured Australia in 1974. In 1979 he returned to Brazil. In 1988 he was appointed as the Secretary of Education in Sao Paulo.

Freire was a creative thinker in the field of educational practice (Freire 1992, loc 2684). He described himself “as an educator with the people, using a dialogical and problem-posing education” (Freire 1970, 14) “The pedagogy of the oppressed is a task for radicals” he wrote (Freire 1970, 13) and required a life of constant re-examination and rebirth to a new form of existence as an educator. “Freire’s project was grounded in the Christian faith” (Abbott and Badley 2018, 115).

Theory and Practice

Paulo Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in Chile, 1970. As a Christian humanist, a democrat and an educator, Freire critiqued the oppressive and dehumanising conditions of the peasants and urban workers living under a regime where people were regarded as things, exploited, treated unjustly and with violence. The oppressed yearned for freedom and justice and struggled to recover their “lost humanity” (Freire 1970, 18-19).

Freire advocated a humanising educational process as part of the vocation to become fully human (Freire 1970, 18, 29, 40, 47, 146, 152); a “pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity” (Freire 1970, 22). Oppressors dehumanised and

prevented the oppressed from being “fully human” (Freire 1970, 30). He proposed an education for liberation whereby a man or woman would become a new person, a new being, self-aware, conscious of the reality of their oppression and through praxis critically aware of their situation. Freedom would be gained “by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire 1970, 25, 40, 41,43, 60, 73, 101, 102).

Freire called this process “conscientization” meaning “an awakening of consciousness” (Sanders 1970, 9). Through literacy training in Brazil and Chile, Freire helped peasants and urban workers articulate their cultural situation through a process of self-discovery, gradually becoming aware of their oppression and learning to “read the world” and do something about it. He always respected people’s “knowledge of living experience” (Freire 1992, loc 731, loc 1486, loc 1507, loc 1997). He opposed what he termed “the concept of banking education” whereby education “becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire 1970, 45-47). Oppressors used the banking concept of education to dominate, control and manipulate.

Instead, Freire proposed a “problem-posing education,” whereby teacher and student participating together, co-teachers and co-learners, posed the problems of human beings in relation to their world, and together, through critical thinking by dialogue (reflection and action) decided on “generative themes” to investigate (Freire 1970,70-75). These themes emerged by respecting and learning from the lives of the people. Freire wrote, “I repeat: the investigation of thematics involves the investigation of the people’s thinking – thinking which occurs only in and among people together seeking out reality. I cannot think for others or without others, nor can others think for me” (Freire 1970, 81).

Once a theme was chosen the movement of enquiry happened in four stages: investigation including an observation visit of the context; team evaluation of the findings; returning to the original context with the outcomes so that the participants could decide whether the report represented what “they said what they really felt” (Freire 1970, 91); fourthly, the content of the theme was then decided and studied, drawing in other information, resources and methods. This democratic process of choosing content was matched by the democratisation of teaching the content, teacher and students/participants together. Freire wrote that teachers and leaders involved in democratic educational practice (Freire 1994, loc 2018), “do not come to teach or to transmit or to give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people’s world” (Freire 1970, 153). The content was derived from the context. The process, the movement of the enquiry through the various stages generated the content from within the contextual situation. Freire wrote that education for liberation “starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically with the people, it serves to introduce the pedagogy of the oppressed, in elaboration of which the oppressed must participate” (Freire 1970, 97).

In his book *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire wrote about the facilitating role of the progressive educator and the discipline “of studying, teaching, learning and knowing” (Freire 1992, loc 1454). That discipline was difficult, demanding and joyous. The role of teachers in the “birthing” of the discipline was enormous. “Progressive educators have never to underestimate or reject knowledge had from living experience, with which educands come to school or to informal centers of education” (Freire 1994, loc 1486). Going beyond that local knowledge is permissible but not to bypass it for erudite universal knowledge only (Freire 1992, loc 1496 – loc 1507).

The dream of humanisation (Freire 1992, loc 1765) rested on certain values: the dignity of each person, equality, the right of people to knowledge and cultural awareness, faith in people and their potentialities, trust in relationships and dialogue, humility and the courage to love and be empathetic, and the ability to cooperate in a shared effort. Through praxis (reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it) the oppressed came to see themselves as persons, no longer things possessed by others, but conscious of themselves as human beings, growing and becoming fully human (Freire 1970, 140-156; Sanders 1970, 9).

Ivan Illich, 1926-2002

Eric Fromm described Ivan Illich as a humanist radical, whose work had “a liberating effect on the mind by showing entirely new possibilities” (Illich 1970, vii-x). Born in Vienna, Illich studied in Florence, Salzburg and Rome. He served as Roman Catholic priest in New York amongst Puerto Rican people. From 1956-1960 he served as vice-rector of the Catholic University in Puerto Rico. He co-founded the Center for Intercultural Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Leaving that Center in 1969 he divided his time between Mexico, USA and Germany, teaching and writing. Fromm wrote that Illich was deeply concerned “for man’s unfolding – physically, spiritually and intellectually” (Illich 1970, x). In summary, Illich argued that institutions are for people, not people for institutions. Schools are there to serve the students, not the students to serve the institution (Illich 1971, 70-71). Human liberation was his passion.

Theory and practice

In the work *Deschooling Society*, Illich made a critique of the American School system in the years 1960’s-1970’s; inequalities of opportunity, student drop-out, the student was ‘schooled’ in an obligatory, bureaucratic and manipulative system where teaching was confused with learning; grade advancement was thought to be education; the student became a product of the educational machine in the knowledge industry. Teachers taught a uniform packaged planned curriculum and students thought that learning was “the result of curricular teaching” (Illich 1971, 58, 64). Illich concluded that the school was a “manipulative institution” where “education is assumed to be the result of an institutional process managed by the educator” (Illich 1971, 73). He made the point that most learning does not require school teaching. “Everyone learns how to live outside school.” (Illich 1971, 52, 35).

He also spoke about the need for “a new style of public education” in Puerto Rico; “alternatives to the school that offer preferable operations to students, teachers, and taxpayers.” During a graduation speech at the University of Puerto in Rio Piedras, he said, “Youth want educational institutions that provide them with education. They neither want nor need to be mothered, to be certified, or to be indoctrinated.” The basic purpose of public education was to create a situation where individuals could “take stock” of themselves, grow an independent sense of life and relatedness, as well having “increased access to and use of, memories stored in the human community. The educational institution provides the focus for this process” (Illich 1970, 123-127).

Illich’s critique of the existing public education may surprise some educators. Yet, his critique and suggestions for educational reform resonated with a few leaders in the Victorian Education Department, Australia, during the late 1960’s and 1970’s. For example, one different type of State school was developed at Maryvale High School in Morwell located in the Latrobe Valley, where I was a teacher 1969-1973. Maryvale High School was a

community of people with a philosophy of education based on a deep understanding of human values, human relationships and the ‘becoming’ of the whole person. People mattered first and foremost in this school community. The school environment and organisation were for people rather than the people existing for the organisation. Each student learnt how to learn.

Illich made a case for an alternative kind of school, which would be a “convivial” institution (Illich 1971, 58) with a focus on the learner and the facilitation of learning; an institution which supported personal growth and a life of action, encouraged spontaneous and independent learning, individual imagination and personal creativity, and was relational, in accord with the nature of human life and the natural inclination to grow and learn (Illich 1971, 9, 65-66, 74). For Illich a convivial society was “committed to high levels of shared learning and critical personal discourse”; personal relatedness, friendship and joyousness; “graceful playfulness in personal relations” (Illich 1973, loc 84, loc 150, loc 164).

These new educational institutions ought to start, not with the question “What should someone learn?” but with the question, “What kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?” (Illich 1971, 80). He proposed new relational structures “set up to facilitate access” to resources and processes used for formal learning. He recommended “Learning Webs” or networks to facilitate access for the learner and spread equal opportunity for learning and teaching: reference services; skill exchanges; peer-matching; and professional educators to work collaboratively to help with pedagogy and intellectual leadership in all fields of knowledge (Illich 1971, 75-105).

Illich was concerned to protect and nurture the experience of learning for each learner; to provide ways and means to enhance the surprise, excitement and the encounter of learning, an exercise of liberty in which others surprise us and we learn from others and the Other (Illich 1970, 127). He was very attentive to the learning encounter. In a chapter entitled “The Eloquence of Silence” he described relatedness through the grammar of silence. “Much more is relayed from one man to another through and in silence than in words” he wrote (Illich 1970, 31). “The learning of the grammar of silence is an art much more difficult to learn than the grammar of sounds.” He discussed “the classification of silences”: the pure listener showing deep interest; the silence before words or between words, a silence of nourishment and growth between persons and God; the silence beyond words; and the silence of opening the soul (Illich 1970, 32-37). Learning the silence of people rather than learning the sounds is a special gifted and deep experience to nurture in education.

Illich’s understanding of Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates and helps explain his passion to liberate and nurture the spontaneity of the learning encounter. During a sermon 1987, in Chicago, Illich explained that the Samaritan acted with untrammelled freedom; the neighbour could have been anyone. Within the Gospel of Love there is the freedom to turn in love towards the other in need, whoever that may be, and that is an unpredictable situation which requires a spontaneous response. The Samaritan answered a call, moved by compassion. The Samaritan did not fulfil a duty or obey a rule but acted freely and fearlessly outside the cultural expectation of the time, enacting God’s love revealed in Jesus (Cayley 2005, 107-112). This understanding of the parable may not be noticed easily “because centuries of preaching have inured (people) to the idea that this parable exemplifies a rule concerning how one should behave; but Jesus’ auditors would have seen in this story a shocking violation of ethical decency (Cayley 2005, 110).

Illich focused attention onto the learner, and the nature of the learning experience encounter. The ‘convivial’ school, the ‘learning webs’ and the ‘professional educators’ were to facilitate learning, rather than to tell and control what learning happens. Illich conceived “a different style of learning” (Illich 1971, 75). He wrote, “The relational structures we need are those which will enable each man to define himself by learning and by contributing to the learning of others” (Illich 1971, 74).

Contextualisation

The matter of contextualisation needs to be discussed at this point in the paper, the adopting or adapting approaches and methods from other learning contexts. Is it appropriate, fifty years on, to learn from and apply the work of Freire and Illich to the learning and teaching activities of parishes and congregations within church contexts today? Freire and Illich’s educational approaches emerged from their unique contexts. Their work was published. Their work resonated with some people in other contexts. On hearing or reading about these approaches, other educators were helped to further their work and ministry. Freire and Illich travelled the world, shared their stories of educational practice and found that others appreciated their contribution, not to be copied but the principles and practices enlightened and assisted educators elsewhere. Their ideas rubbed off on others and on me. It is entirely appropriate to gain insights from their work.

Freire illustrated such an attitude through his conversations around the world. When touring Australia for example, Freire enunciated his educational thinking and then spent a great deal of time listening and learning from others in their contexts. When others asked his advice about the application of his educational practice to different situations he insisted that “he would not attempt to offer ‘answers’ for Australia’s problems”. His experience could be a point of reference, our task was to “Australianise” his experience and learnings (Lovell 1974, 4). Freire was determined not to impose, rather to consult and respect the “knowledge of living experience” in each context he encountered. He wrote “What is ethically required of progressive educators is that, consistent with their democratic dream, they respect the educands, and therefore never manipulate them” (Freire 1992, loc 1417).

Educators in one context are influenced by educators in another context. Freire and Illich’s work influenced me in the 1970’s and that influence rubbed off on me as I went forward in parish Christian education. The Principal of Maryvale High School in Morwell, David Schapper, read and was to some extent influenced by Illich. On 21/12/1972, Schapper gave me a copy of Illich’s book *Celebration of Awareness* as a Christmas present. Maryvale High School was an open plan approach secondary school, a ‘convivial institution,’ where the principal and staff were student and process focussed, seeking to facilitate learning. Schapper with the staff contextualised Illich’s ideas in an Australian context as much as was reasonably possible then.

Insights about a learning community approach to parish learning as a result of revisiting the work of Freire and Illich

We now respond to the learning question proposed for the paper: what insights would be gained by Christian educators who apply a learning community approach to parish learning?

The paper addresses the issues, constructive suggestions and comments that arise as a result of reflection on the work of Freire and Illich in relation to a learning community approach.

Two images help reflection, the image of a window and the image of a mirror. The paper has provided a window onto the ‘worlds’ of Freire and Illich. A mirror reflects and reveals resonances, affirmation, reminders and a critique.

Resonances

The five standout educational practices recommended by Freire and Illich, which resonate with the learning community approach and reinforce the importance of learning community processes in parish learning are: the reflection-action process; the convivial institution notion; the style of teaching and leadership; an holistic attitude; and a learning outcome interest. These topics match the essentials of a learning community perspective in parish learning. Such correlations on these topics may suggest the influence of the earlier educators on the latter. Educational ideas from one generation rub off and influence future generations.

Theological reflection is an essential process in a learning community approach; a reflective learning process moving from present life actions through a consideration of the biblical story and traditions towards renewed future action. In Freire’s education for liberation, reflection and action were essential. Praxis is reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. In Freire’s terms an enquiry moved from the living experience of people through a reflection-action process and problem solving towards generative themes, which were to be considered by all involved.

Illich’s notion of a “convivial” school institution compares well with the collaborative learning processes of a learning community where shared leadership, teamwork and respect for the contributions of others, enable learning and achieve a common task. For Illich a convivial community is committed to shared learning, critical discourse and relational structures which help people grow and learn. Illich proposed learning webs or networks to promote learning outcomes.

The word “facilitation” summarises the style of teaching and learning espoused in a learning community and in the work of Freire and Illich. The role of the teacher and leader (Freire), the professional educator (Illich), was to facilitate learning rather than impose or prescribe or indoctrinate. Process was as important as content, as it is in a learning community.

Holistic learning processes in a learning community show a concern for the whole person, the whole parish context; all individuals, groups, the congregation, community engagement and dialogue across differences. The degree of holism depends upon the extent to which these five parts of parish learning figure in the parish profile. Freire sought to apply a humanising educational process for all those oppressed (individual and a people); a process respectful of their own thinking, feeling and living experience. Illich paid attention to the individual learner, the nature of the learning experience encounter and educational processes that enabled human learning and growth in accord with the natural human life.

Freire, Illich and a learning community approach emphasise the importance learning outcomes to further learning and growth. Learning involves a permanent change of attitude and behaviour in a person or a group. Freire’s process of conscientization enabled an awakening of consciousness for peasants as they became literate and began to read their

world, regain their humanity and do something about their oppressed situation. Illich's educational approach supported personal growth outcomes, independent learning, creativity, a life of action, choice of learning topics as well access to wider themes. Participants involved in research on parish-based learning community approach reported the learning outcomes of very much growth in their knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith.

Affirmation

These five aspects of educational practice confirm that learning community processes, as described in this paper, are consistent with the effective educational thinking and practices of Freire and Illich, albeit taken from different times and contexts. Such an alignment reinforces the importance, worthwhileness and the effectiveness of a learning community approach for learning in congregations. Christian educators with this approach in parishes today may feel supported and their educational practices affirmed by the work of Freire and Illich.

Reminders (and some warnings!)

In the spirit of Freire and Illich's radical educational ideas some of these amber light reminders with warnings are more adventurous than others and may take some readers out of their comfort zone.

In his 1971 *Deschooling Society*, Illich critiqued American public school system and proposed an alternative approach to better focus on the learner and learning. In the 1970's Christian educators like John Westerhoff in USA sought to de-school Christian education. He wanted to move the discipline of Christian education away from a dominant schooling-instructional teaching model towards a community of faith model in parishes, maintaining the view that the whole life of a congregation offered times and places in which Christian learning may occur (Westerhoff 1976, 6-7, 50; Westerhoff 2012, 21-22, 141-142). This educational approach was indigenous to a community of faith. Illich's word "deschooling" is a reminder to Christian educators to keep on deschooling parish education and not slip back into a dominant schooling-instruction mode.

In a similar way, Freire's concept of "banking education" is a reminder to Christian educators of the danger of understanding education as a way to impose or manipulate or control; banking or depositing information or principle into people where the teacher becomes a "bank-clerk" educator (Freire 1970, 49). Such education is prescriptive. It dehumanizes. It treats people as objects rather than persons. It disrespects the knowledge of living experience and is "impermissible" (Freire 1992, loc 1475) in a learning community approach.

Freire and Illich were education reformers. They sought to shift educational practice *from* an instructional teaching process with prescribed, imposed and uniform content *towards* an educational approach, which was process, learner and context centred. In the educational approach that focussed on the learner and the learning processes, the teacher or leader facilitated the learning in each context. For Freire, the reflection and action learning process enabled the content, the generative themes, to emerge. Those themes became content to consider through the discipline of studying, teaching, learning and knowing. Professional educators collaborated and facilitated learning through learning webs described by Illich.

A learning community, as previously indicated, is not defined by content. It has to do with core learning processes which enhance the knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith. Process is as important as content. The concept of a parish or congregation as a learning community is not mainly that of a community around specific content. It is a community that has specific learning processes as ways of undertaking that learning, on whatever topic, discipleship or mission.

Examination of the work of Freire and Illich alerts Christian educators today to recognise occasions when church leaders and membership place a strong emphasis on content to the detriment of learning processes. Recognise when the main focus is on content, telling and the transmission or acquisition of knowledge, rather than on listening, facilitating and using participatory learning processes.

Equality of access to learning

The opportunity for all to participate in learning is a hallmark of a learning community approach. It was also an aspiration for Freire and Illich in their contexts. A learning community framework is open and flexible enough to cater for a variety of parish contexts and the multiple faith learning needs of individuals, groups and networks within any one congregation (Littleton 2017, 13-17); a community where people learn at their own best pace and way.

One concern expressed in the Anglican Church, and other churches, during the twentieth century was the need to nurture *all* Christian people as disciples in all the contexts of their lives, on Sunday and all week, at work and in daily life. The Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple recognised this issue in 1942 when he wrote, “Nine-tenths of the work of the Church in the world is done by Christian people fulfilling responsibilities and performing tasks...” (Temple 1942, 27). In the 1964 *God’s Frozen People: A book for-and about-ordinary Christians*, Mark Gibbs and Ralph Morton argued for an equality of calling and equality of ministry, rather than hierarchy and clericalism which represented inequality, first class (clergy) and second class (laity) Christians (Gibbs and Morton 1964, 9-15). John Hull from England presented the view in 1985 that the authoritative, hierarchical, high status and instructional role of the official teaching role in the church made adult learning all the more difficult. The teaching role in the church must enable learning rather than control it, must consider the ordinary learner as an enquirer rather than a recipient in a passive role and inferior to the designated teacher (Hull 1985, 201-211).

More recently Jeff Astley introduced the term “ordinary theology,” which describes “the articulation of ordinary people’s religious understanding” (Astley 2002, 56). His research focused on the theology of Christians who had received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind. His interest was in the God-talk of people who have not formally studied theology but who thought and talked of God. Astley focused on what the learner had in fact learnt and articulated, rather than what they had been taught. Astley along with others have conducted evidence-based research on ordinary theology (Astley and Francis 2013). Empirical research on parish-based education is greatly needed and must continue as Lucille Otero and Michael Cottrell argued (Otero and Cottrell 2019).

As Freire wrote “There has never been an educational practice without content” (Freire 1992 loc 1975). To balance teaching content and doctrinal topics delivered by official church sources, the lectionary, academic theologians or theological colleges, Christian educators are

reminded to respect the knowledge of living experience of people's lives and to ask the question about who decides the content (Freire 1992 Loc 1975). As well as asking "What should someone learn?" also ask Illich's other question, "What kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?" Those using a learning community approach would recommend that holistic, collaborative and reflective processes are used to explore the content (whatever content might be chosen!) to enhance Christian learning for all.

A critique

Freire and Illich were humanists whose work was grounded in the Christian faith in their contexts. Their educational practice was based on human(e) values. Freire's work was based on his love of and faith in humankind (Freire 1970, 64-65). He respected persons, their human dignity, their world view and their capacity to learn. Freire believed that education could not be neutral. His process of conscientisation through praxis (reflection and action) helped people be aware of their humanity and become fully human. He advocated a humanising educational process and was aware of dehumanising tendencies. As an educator with great respect for persons he stated, "It is not our role to speak to the people about our view of the world, nor attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours" (Freire 1970, 69). Freire and Illich had a passion for human liberation. Illich respected human dignity, valued the learner, the facilitation of learning and a convivial environment in which human beings would learn, grow and become fully human in accord with the nature of human life.

The humanising educational practice of Freire and Illich reminds Christian educators today to nurture a Christian education that humanises. The emphasis on humanisation highlights the lack of formal reference to human(e) values in the presentation of a learning community approach. This paper provides an opportunity to make good that omission.

A learning community approach already has a biblical foundation (the image of the 'body of Christ'), a theology and an educational base with a focus on learners (Littleton 2017, 35-43, 45-54); Littleton 2018, 321-322). A theology of a learning community recognises that God-in-Christ through the Holy Spirit is indeed at work in the processes of the approach (Littleton 2017, 57-59). Use of the learning processes of holism, collaboration and theological reflection implies a respect for persons, human dignity, and human(e) values. Such a Christian humanist educational and ethical stance has not yet been formally articulated as a key aspect of a learning community approach.

A learning community approach humanises and use learning processes that are human(e), understanding that human beings are made in the image of God. Such humanising intentions can properly be based on the description of Jesus Christ in the Church's Nicene Creed, as "truly human". The words in the Gospel according to Matthew 5: 1-12, the Beatitudes, are considered to be a portrait of Jesus: poor in spirit, caring, meek, just, compassionate, pure in heart, peacemaker, counter-cultural, persecuted. Many of these attributes, descriptive of Jesus, correlate with a contemporary writer, John Shea's understanding of the fully human: integrity, mutuality, care, compassion, justice and peace (Littleton 2019). Disciples of Jesus can indeed describe Jesus as the "fully human" one, who, as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels, was holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective as the Teacher (Littleton

2014). An intentional long-term life-long learning outcome in parish learning is for people become fully human adults.

Conclusion

Three benefits result from this review of a learning community approach to parish learning. The review was conducted in the light of the work and ‘worlds’ of Freire and Illich. The three benefits for Christian educators are: affirmation, reminders and a new insight. First, Christian educators in parishes today may feel supported and their learning community approach affirmed by these two exceptional educators. Second, there are eight reminders to be alert: nurture a “convivial” faith community; respect the knowledge of living experience; remember that the context is the parish or congregation; understand that process is as important as content; avoid a dominant schooling-instructional teaching mode; reject contemporary versions of “banking education”; awaken the consciousness of learners to their full potential in learning; and recognise dehumanising tendencies. Third, treasure the insight that a learning community approach to parish learning has a humanising intent.

These three benefits provide potentially effective educational perspectives with *implications* for parish learning today: affirmation, reminders and a humanising intent.

In addition, and finally, know that the humanising intentions of the learning community approach in parish learning are grounded in the person and work of Jesus the Christ, the fully human one.

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