Transcript of ENHANCE Podcast Episode: Communities for Change
Recorded by: EAEA

Intro

Welcome to the Enhance podcasts. In this episode we continue our discussion and exploration of educational processes based on the voice of the learner with Emer Costello, Hayleigh Keogh, and Art O'Leary. Emer Costello is the head of advocacy and campaigns at Rehab Group, former Lord Mayor of Dublin and former member of the European Parliament; Hayleigh Keogh is a student from the National Learning Network and member of the Rehab Group; and Art O'Leary is the CEO of Ireland's Electoral Commission.

Greta Pelucco

Wow, wow. It's been very inspiring to hear all of this and we've been talking about very interesting and again inspiring examples so far. But unfortunately, we all know that the geopolitical context is changing, with new priorities emerging and budgets shifting towards these. One of them is the growing focus on skills and competitiveness, as you all know. So my question on this is: how can we reconcile the human and civic dimension of learning with a strong policy focus on skills and competitiveness? Maybe, Emer, I will start with you and then move on with Art on this.

Emer Costello

Yeah. It's interesting because we've just come out of the European Year of Skills, Greta. The European Year of Skills was last year and actually, the National Learning Network, the college that Hayleigh attends, we were invited to go to present to a parliamentary committee on the European Year of Skills. And I think the central message that we took to that parliamentary committee, and it's the message that we have around skills and competitiveness, is that skills really do need to be understood in a more holistic way. It's not just about skills for professional development or skills for employment, you also need to equip people with transversal skills that we talked about, the life skills to be able to strengthen sustainability, democracy and social inclusion. So it goes back to what we were talking about earlier around our global citizenship education and trying to make

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sure that people can understand their role in the world and how they can help contribute to making the world a better place. And it also means that, if we talk about those kinds of holistic skills, we're talking about creative thinking, we're talking about problem solving, we're talking about intercultural communication, and we're talking about what we mentioned earlier, collaboration, and media literacy and particularly navigating elections. Nothing is more important. I think Art would agree with this more than media literacy, particularly with the challenges that we are faced with today. Just engagement in the whole democratic process. I really, really strongly believe this and I think that this is something that we do need to be particularly vigilant about. I know that the next European budget is being debated at the moment, and we still want to see a strong emphasis within the European budget on the development of programmes and a more holistic type of education, because that's what builds the citizens of tomorrow. And there are so many challenges as you mentioned, like particularly now with the challenges of artificial intelligence coming down the road as well, we need humans who have human skills to be able to navigate all of this.

Greta Pelucco
I couldn't agree more.

Art O'Leary
Yeah, if I could just maybe add to that, Greta. We need to get away from thinking that voting is simply a transactional process, that you go in, you get a ballot paper, you write one, two and three, etcetera. It's the understanding of what your vote means, why your voice is important. And you do need to know how to vote as well, but as part of your engagement in a democracy and as a member of society where we treat everybody the same and everybody has the same voice. People need to understand what candidates stand for, who they should vote for, whose values are shared with yours as a voter. All of these issues are a really important part of our education and engagement as well. It's not simply "you'll be handed a piece of paper and you write #1 against the person you like the most, #2 against your second favorite, etc.". It's that wider, as Emer said, that more holistic view of why democracy is important and how best to use your voice to really make a difference for people like ourselves.

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Many of us face many challenges in the course of our day-to-day lives and the political system needs to understand that these challenges exist and that they need to be faced down. And it goes back to one of the points I made earlier, that some people genuinely feel that their single voice won't matter, it can't possibly make a difference. But for the thousands of people who attended the Rehab seminars when they went to go and vote they weren't a single voice, they were thousands of people. The political system understood the roar of that community. And we want all communities to roar and to use their voice in collaboration with their others. Go and talk to your friends, talk to your family, explain what's important to you, and become an advocate for this engagement in our democracy and our elections.

Greta Pelucco

Wow, wow, great. That's very inspiring and indeed, drop by drop you create the ocean. This is the metaphor that we can use, voice by voice. Emer first was mentioning the multiannual financial framework and the financial crisis that each country is facing at the moment. So Art, I would like to continue with you and then maybe ask Emer if you have something more to add on this. Given the financial constraints we're all facing, inside and outside Europe, what can we do to make the most of the existing resources and partnerships that we already have?

Art O'Leary

Yeah, two points here if we approach it from two different directions. First, we always find money for things we think are important. So we need to acknowledge that if this is important, it needs to be funded. We're a brand new organization and we're setting up our hiring staff, we bought a building, we're setting up filing systems, we ought to buy laptops and all of these things, as well as running all these education programs. The Irish government has been very good so far about funding our programs, but as we become more and more ambitious and these programs become bigger and we try to scale them, we will soon get the opportunity to test this level of ambition and this level of priority as well. What we do need to demonstrate is that we can provide efficient and effective use of resources. And this is where technology comes in, because we don't always need to turn up in every classroom in the country or in every group in the country. We can use technology, we can use collaborations, we can train the trainer. It is nice when we bring the circus into town because we love to speak directly to our audiences, but I have to

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acknowledge that I can't turn up and be in the living room in every house in the country between now and 2025. We're going to have to do it by collaboration through others as well. So we will try and spread the message as effectively as we can using our key stakeholders. And it goes back to the point I made earlier that people don't necessarily always want to see me. Young people want to hear from other young people and people with disabilities and travellers, etcetera. Buy wherever we're asked to go, we will go. Ireland is a small country and there's nowhere that is more than four hours drive away for us, so we expect to be busy and we hope to be busy in the next four years in advance of the presidential or the next series of elections.

Greta Pelucco

Thank you so much, Art. This is really amazing to hear. I hope that many policymakers are going to listen to this podcast actually. Emer, do you have maybe something else to add about what you were saying before?

Emer Costello

I think Art has said it all quite eloquently, but regarding what he said in terms of that if it matters, governments will always find the money, I think that some things are more important to some public representatives than others, so the public representatives we choose determine to a large extent where they are going to place their priorities. And for me, it kind of goes back to this idea of economic development or social investment. I certainly think that it shouldn't ever be a question of one being mutually exclusive of the other. The two are just so completely interdependent and that's why it's so important that the European budget will actually strike the right balance, that the politicians that we have elected to agree on this budget, the same as the politicians we elect to agree on our national budgets, that they know and they understand the priorities. I think that they need to be able to achieve that kind of a balance.

I was at the 50 year celebration of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, it's an EU agency, and they were talking about the importance of having a really strong social Europe. The whole theme coming through that meeting was around the fact that social Europe and social investment is not an optional add-on. Through economic development you won't get social cohesion, you won't have flourishing democratic societies if you don't have that

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investment in social services and education. And it's important that people understand that and they understand the kind of priorities that they want. And I think one of the things that came through so much from the election, and Art is right, disability became a huge issue during the election. And that was the collective voice of people with disabilities. I could see and hear people who use Rehab services or who have used Rehab services out there campaigning and advocating on behalf of people with disabilities. And it was actually really refreshing to see the people with disabilities themselves out there influencing the course of an election and actually making sure that a lot about disability got written into the programme for government afterwards, because that's how things get written into the programme for government.

Art O'Leary

Again, it comes back to the point academics are always making, that campaigns matter, because it can change the course of the decisions of a nation. But if I can maybe continue this further along the spectrum, we have to stop taking or considering voter education and voter awareness as a cost, Emer just touched on this, it's an investment. It costs us 20 million euros in this country to run an election. Should we not spend 5 or 10% of that making sure that people properly understand and can properly engage with it. So it's not a cost, it's an investment. This is the way that we did it with citizens assemblies, a very effective way of making sure that we got the questions right in referendums, etc. They're not costs, they're investments. So we shouldn't think of them solely in terms of pounds, shillings and pence.

Greta Pelucco

Yeah, you have to look at the bigger picture in the end, definitely. I think that Emer, our listeners can understand your political background here from the words that you just said to describe the situation. And as such, with such a political background, you have a very key role as director of advocacy for Rehab. So from your experience, what have organizations learned, in your opinion, when trying to implement tools centered around the voice of the learners?

Emer Costello

Well, I think since coming to Rehab, one of the first things that I had to come to terms with was the whole notion of co-production. And I think Hayleigh will probably know

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what I mean by this, because Rehab and the National Learning Network and in the voter education program, we try to make sure that what we do and the learning we provide for the learners is relevant for them, but it's done not to them, but it's done with them and with their input and that they can identify what they want and what they need. I think also as a public representative, I remember from being a local councillor to an MEP, there can be issues that come up within local communities and all the time you have very tokenistic consultations, where the policymakers go out and say "we're going to tell you what we're going to do, we're going to give you a lovely new park, it's going to be gorgeous, you're going to love it, and we've decided that we're going to design it in this way", and then somebody says, "but I don't want the playground over there and I think the playground would be better there", and they're saying, "but it's a beautiful park, we've designed it and we've spent a fortune on architects, how can you tell us that you don't want this beautiful park and this beautiful playground, how could you be so ungrateful?", and they say, "but if you had asked us about this in the first instance, if you had asked us what we wanted and what kind of a playground we wanted, we could have designed it together and it could have been so lovely". I think that's at the heart of all types of collaborations and experiences. So I think that when you're trying to implement tools around the voice of the learners, there is no point in going to the learner and saying "we've designed this beautiful program for you, here you are, come and do it". You have to be able to co-produce, to co-design with the learners and to say "this is your program, you are part of this and it is important that we do this". Now, we talk about doing this a lot and it's actually hugely challenging to deliver co-produced and co-designed programmes, and in all honesty, I think it's something that we in Rehab were very committed to and we're still learning and designing and trying to work out what is the best way and how can we do it to make sure that it's a real partnership and it's not tokenistic.

Greta Pelucco

Yeah, I think it's a learning process and you learn by doing in the end because you have to face different challenges every time. Art, maybe you also have a take on that. I would like to see if you have something to add on how the voice of the learners shapes the education programs put in place by the Electoral Commission. You already shared with us a lot of views and examples, but maybe you have something more specific here on what Emer was saying.

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Art O'Leary

Yeah, it's the centre of everything. We have objectives here that we understand, that we need to get people engaged, etcetera. But we won't know what we don't know unless we engage with the people that we're hoping to persuade to get involved in their democracy, in their local areas and at a national level too. So we place learners and we place all of our stakeholders at the centerpiece of all of our design: "tell us where the gaps are, tell us why you don't get engaged, tell us why you feel elections aren't important for you or that politics has nothing to do with you, and tell us how best to communicate with people in your community". And I think if you don't do that, in an authentic way, then you're wasting your time, because then we might as well sit in our ivory tower. We have a lovely office here in Dublin Castle, we should all just sit in our offices and design programs about solutions to what we think are problems and without any real grasp of what some of these challenges might be. So it has been a great learning experience for us. We have set up four working groups covering different areas in our education and public engagement strategy, and we hope to take all of the inputs and all the contributions from really brilliant stakeholders with very authentic challenges, and we'll try and work out some solutions to them and get matching funding to go and sort all of that out.

Greta Pelucco

OK, well, now we have seen the whole package of the process part of the educational program. So now I would like to go straight to the results. Hayleigh, as a learner and looking back at your learning journey, how do you see yourself evolve? What did you discover about yourself and how has that helped you in your everyday life or participation in society?

Hayleigh Keogh

I think that everybody comes to education for their own reasons and from a range of different backgrounds, and I think it's important that the education system approaches each individual learning journey in a person-centred way. For myself, it was to learn new skills and to further my career. However, through the extra activities and opportunities I've been offered throughout my time in the National Learning Network, I've gained more than I could have imagined: I've gained a lot of confidence in myself, I've gained clarity on my next steps, and I've really found a

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passion in supporting others to have their voice heard too. So by the staff supporting me to raise my own voice, I now have more motivation to continue to speak out on the issues that affect people with disabilities in society and to engage in that in a democratic way. And I've also seen the value and effect of lending your voice to supporting others. So I think there's strength in numbers.

Greta Pelucco

Great. And we've heard from Emer and Art how the process works, how they sit together with the learners to understand their challenges and work together on the solutions, but this is not the case for every country. Not everybody, unfortunately, is doing that. So, what do you wish policymakers would consider more when it comes to education and training?

Hayleigh Keogh

I think that policymakers need to make sure that education is not exclusive, and that there is as much value in developing life skills as there is in academics. I think they also need to look at the supports available for people with hidden disabilities, and understand that routine and structure pose different challenges for different people. I think the more flexible the structure is, the more it supports engagement and participation. I also think that there's a difference between learning and employability. Both have equal value, but I think that education has a ripple effect, and what I learned today benefits me today, but I can pass that benefit on to the wider community in the coming days and weeks and so on.

Greta Pelucco

I hope our listeners are taking note of what you just said because it's the core of everything in the end. Thank you so much for sharing this. So we're coming to the end of our discussion. I want to deeply thank you for sharing your thoughts, insight and experiences with us today. But before closing and wrapping everything up, I'd like to leave the audience with a final round of two questions in order to give them some food for thought before leaving. So the first question is: what is the missing piece in the puzzle to maximize learners participation in education and training? Hayleigh, I would like to start with you.

Hayleigh Keogh

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I think, from my own personal experience, that it's important that what learners want to see and achieve is not just assumed for them and that they're given the platforms to express the issues that they're facing and what they think could be done to overcome these issues and these difficulties. And I think learners feeling that their voice is valued and taken into consideration will go a long way to ensuring that they feel engaged in the democratic process.

Greta Pelucco

Great. Thank you so much. Emer, back to you.

Emer Costello

Yeah, Hayleigh said it very well there, and going back to what I just said before, I think co-production, co-design of the learner's programmes and experience just really does need to be at the heart of their participation in any programme. And it's not necessarily easy. It can be challenging to make sure that we do that, but I think that it has to start off on the basis of co-production and that the learner's voice is central.

Art O'Leary

If I can just perhaps add to that from our own perspective on this, here in the Electoral Commission. We don't allow the words "hard to reach" to be used in this building, because in our mind there is no such thing as "hard to reach people" or "hard to reach groups", there are only hard to reach services. So our focus has been entirely on looking at this issue from the other end of the telescope, because we need to meet people where they are. So we go to places where people hang out, because people with disabilities and travelers and immigrants and young people, they're not hard to reach. They get up every day, they live their lives, they go about their business, they have good days and bad days. But historically, people like me were nowhere near their communities, so we will meet people where they are. Some of these spaces are virtual now. It's very important that we have a very active presence in the virtual space, so TikTok is now our single most important way of communicating with young people. This year for the presidential election that we've just had, we started our registration campaign in Electric Picnic, which is a music festival. We registered thousands of young people to vote at a music festival. We turned up in freshers' weeks in universities, at the ploughing championships and

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physical spaces, but also virtual spaces as well. We need to find out where people are and go and meet them there. We cannot expect them to come to us continuously when we're trying to talk to them about something that they don't consider to be important. So beware, listeners, beware. We will be in places where you hang out, I'm afraid. And whether you like it or not, we're going to have a message for you, which we hope you'll find and we do it in an entertaining way.

Emer Costello
Electric Picnic is the Glastonbury of Ireland.

Art O'Leary
It's a music festival, and it was great. We had, in between Chapel Rowan and Kneecap and all of these big acts, our advertisements on the sides of the stages and we gave away hundreds of T-shirts and bucket hats, and we got people to do mock ballots and the prizes for their best suggestions and for everything else were backstage passes and all sorts. It was a real investment for us. And I'm back again using that word, Greta. This is an investment. We don't consider these as a cost,because we need to find out where all of these people who don't engage hang out and then we need to go there with a message that they understand and will enjoy.

Greta Pelucco
Yeah, we need to shift this mentality to investment, because it changes everything. But I like your view on the "hard to reach". I think I'm going to change the title of the podcast thanks to this. So thank you so much for the inspiration. So now the last question, and Emer, I would like to start with you, then back to Art and finally Hayleigh with the last thoughts for our audience. If you could imagine Europe five years from now, what would a society look like where every learner truly has a voice?

Emer Costello
Oh, wow. Wouldn't that be just a wonderful place now? And it should be so possible, I think, to have a Europe in five years where every learner has a voice, as a society that is actually built on meaningful investment in the development of life skills and education, and social investment, and as Art has said, that it would be regarded as

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such, as absolutely essential. A society that understands that education is not about preparing for the labour market and preparing people for employment. It's equipping people with the skills to live the best lives that they can in the best way that they can.

I just think that that is so important because if people do have the skills to live the best life that they can, that is really, for me, the foundation of when we talk about social cohesion, about having the social Europe and about having a society where everybody has their place, can live independently, can make decisions and is seen as an asset to the community, and where education, but particularly above all else education for life and the development of life and transversal skills, are highly valued. I hope that we will see that in five years time with the outcomes of some of the both European and national budgets.

Greta Pelucco

I really share your hopes, Emer, really. Art, please take the floor.

Art O'Leary

OK, well, very briefly, because I'm more interested in Hayleigh's view and we should get to that quickly. I would love it if everybody understood the power of their voice, and therefore the power of their vote. I want to see people racing to polling stations, making special plans to go and vote, engaging during campaigns, engaging with candidates, and challenging candidates to ensure that they understand each voter's view and the importance of issues that are important to them.

So what I'm looking to see is engagement during campaigns and then, this education program that we're going to run out over the next couple of years, to see that reflected in turnout, particularly young people. Because the academics tell us that if you vote the first or second time after you become eligible, there is every chance that you will get into the routine of voting when elections come along. If you don't vote that first or second time after you become 18, then you're probably lost to us until your 30s or 40s. So young people really engaging with the electoral process, running for office. I want to see people with disabilities, I want to see immigrants, I'd like to see ethnic minorities, young people, more women, all running for elected office and I'd like to see the people of Ireland take these candidates seriously too.

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Greta Pelucco
Great advice.

Emer Costello
And maybe just before Hayleigh comes in, Greta, I'd like to add that when we talk about it in the European context, I also just think it's so important that the funding that we have for programmes like Erasmus and the way that that has facilitated mobility and people to be able to travel and the investment that has gone into the European Social Fund to date, I think that we need to see that coming through, and we need to see all of those opportunities continue to be provided for young people. Art talked about the experiences of young people, and in my experience of looking at young people who have had the opportunity to participate in Erasmus programmes has shown that they do develop those kinds of skills. So I just think that it is really important that we put investment into education for life, that we put investment into Erasmus, but also that we put money into the European Social Fund and we ensure that both at a European level and at a national level, that we're funding disability services and that people with disabilities are not being excluded and have equal opportunities in all of the opportunities that are available to citizens of Europe.

Art O'Leary
And maybe just because you mentioned Erasmus, an interesting Erasmus fact, I'm a huge supporter of the Erasmus programme: since the Erasmus program was established, more than a million babies have been born to couples who met during their Erasmus experience. So the diversity that that simple program has brought to all of our countries and the richness that has been involved there, it has been a truly European experience.

Greta Pelucco
Oh yeah, definitely. And talking about young people, Hayleigh being the youngest in the group, please take your moment now to explain your view on this.

Hayleigh Keogh
So I'm going to echo a bit on what Emer and Art said earlier. I think that that Europe in five years from now would be one where we as a society acknowledge that

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learning is for everyone and it's not entirely focused on employability. I think it would be one where services for people with disabilities would be truly person-centred, and that quality of life would replace the focus on deadlines and targets as a measure of success for people in education. I think the importance of education being a lifelong opportunity would be prioritized and that people would feel included in society, feeling and believing that they have good reason to vote for the decision-makers in their society and that those decision-makers are actively listening.

Greta Pelucco

Thank you so much, Hayleigh. It's the perfect way to wrap up and close the podcast. Thank you so much. Thank you all for listening, we will share all the resources mentioned with the listeners as well. So we'll go back to you, Emer and Art, for the resources that you shared with us, and thank you again for taking the moment today to share your insights with us, I really appreciate it.

Art O'Leary

Great pleasure. Thank you.

Emer Costello

Thank you, Greta, for the opportunity.

Hayleigh Keogh

Thank you.

Outro

Thank you for listening to this episode and we will be waiting for you in the next episodes of the series. Until next time, goodbye. The music of the enhanced podcasts is a creation of Jason Farage and the Urban Nomatic Productions.

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