

# Return to Education for recovering drug addicts: the Soilse project

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## Abstract

*This article is an account of a return to education course set up to cater to the needs of recovering heroin addicts in a Dublin rehabilitation project in the summer of 2008. It begins with a brief outline of the HSE Soilse rehabilitation and recovery programme and the rationale for seeking association with the Department of Adult and Community Education NUI Maynooth as a way of bridging both the structural and individual gaps that recovering people have en route to educational progression. A full account is presented of the actual Return to Learning (RtL) course, which employed a functional context education methodology and integrated literacy approach, from the reflections of the tutors who delivered the course. The Soilse/NUIM RtL is unique in terms of an adult education programme in Ireland in that it tried to grapple with two distinct yet interrelated issues; recovery from drug addiction and educational progression. The following article attempts to give a full and honest account of the programme and its outcomes.*

## Soilse: organisational background.

Soilse (the name means Light in Irish) was set up as the Health Service Executive Northern Sector's Addiction Rehabilitation, Education and Training Centre. It opened in 1992 following discussion with drug users (former and active) and those involved in providing drug services (statutory, voluntary, and community) concerning the needs of people seeking recovery from drug addiction. It set out to address the personal, social, and vocational needs of participants who had typically experienced significant marginalisation, disadvantage and disempowerment as a result of socio-economic and structural inequalities.

Soilse's work has continued to develop in the intervening years to the point where it now provides two distinct strands of a recovery programme. These are

divided into pre-treatment and post-treatment phases which form part of a continuum of care for the individual. Soilse is based in two locations with the pre-treatment stabilisation/detox programme being carried out in Henrietta Place (HP) and post-treatment drug free vocational, educational and career guidance programme located in North Frederick st. The rest of the article will concentrate on the work carried out in the North Frederick st (Soilse NF) facility.

## Soilse and the Continuum of Care

The Soilse model works in the context of addiction. It believes addicted people typically suffer progressive deterioration of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Soilse's participants also suffer acute social exclusion being characterised by early school leaving; poor literacy skills; criminal records; homelessness and poor general health (diet/alcohol/blood borne viruses/smoking). Soilse realises that where addiction exists its goal is to dismantle dependency through personal and social development by utilising adult education and group centred processes.

Soilse operates along a continuum of care which begins with the addicted person accessing drug services, perhaps through the Methadone Maintenance Treatment (MMT) programme. The continuum aims to bring people along this scale through the various stages of recovery such as detoxification, treatment, rehabilitation and finally to the point of abstinence and reintegration. The continuum is an ideal of progression, however, such is the lack of movement from the starting point of MMT that this particular service has come in for severe criticism. A report from the Comptroller and Auditor General states that of the 8,000 people on methadone maintenance in the greater Dublin area in 2009 only 1.25 percent progressed on to detoxification treatment or follow-on rehabilitation (Irish Times, 6 June 2009). It is movement along this continuum that Soilse's first step in Henrietta Place and later North Frederick's st. adult education and guidance programme seeks to accommodate with the Return to Learning course as the final stage of engagement before discharge from services and the transition to aftercare.

Soilse's understanding of adult education as a major component within the transformative processes from dependency to sustainable recovery and from the margins to the mainstream corresponds with that of UNESCO's declaration on the right to learn<sup>15</sup> and with that of the academic think tank the New

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<sup>15</sup> In 1985 the UNESCO Fourth International Conference on Adult Education determined [T]he right to learn is the right to read and write; the right to question and analyse; the right to imagine and create; the right to read about one's own world and to write history; the right to have access to educational resources; the right to develop individual and collective skills.

London Group (NLG). They engaged in constructing new models of literacy in a multimedia world and who determine that ‘...the mission of education, one could say that its fundamental purpose is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community and economic life’ (Cazden et al, 1996, p 60). This is very much Soilse’s philosophy of education and recovery.

#### **The Soilse Programme:**

At present Soilse NF strives to achieve an intake of eight groups per year with an average of twelve people beginning in each group. Participants undertake a six month programme. In the first five months they work on all aspects of their recovery, while simultaneously working on achieving their FETAC certificate. Under the aegis of FETAC participants engage in modules in Communications, Mathematics, Personal and Interpersonal skills, Computer literacy, Art and Design, Craft, Drama, Preparation for Work and Health and Fitness at level 3. At level 4 people can undertake modules in Communications, Computer Applications, Painting, Drawing and Woodcraft. The final month of a participant’s time is given over to working on progression routes with career guidance counselors and an education development worker while simultaneously concentrating on recovery education and relapse prevention.

The idea for some form of a post-Soilse course had been gathering momentum for a number of years. Soilse’s experiences with people in education who are also in recovery brought a number of issues to light. In particular it was recognized how important it is that the recovering person has structure in their lives. The six months that the participant spends in Soilse provides that sense of stability. Ideally this type of structure can then be transferred into a college or university course. However, due to the necessity of a staggered intake and the fact that the academic year runs from September to June while recovery is subject to its own calendar Soilse is often left with people who might have to wait up to ten months before they can enter college or university. This gap presents a number of problems. If the individual returns to work the potential for complications around their recovery and progress arise. In the first instance renewing old social networks and patterns of behaviour allows the possibility of relapse to become a serious threat. Secondly, if the individual has been on one of the social welfare or health benefit schemes, returning to employment makes them ineligible for the Back to Education Allowance, the Vocational and Training Opportunities Scheme or the VEC and HEA grants.

Another issue that staff encountered centred on how prepared the individual is to take on a PLC or undergraduate course. As has already been stated many Soilse participants are early school-leavers this fact coupled with the sense of wasted time in addiction means that quite a number of people feel the need to make up for lost time and seek to embark on educational careers without putting the requisite skills in place. By offering a return to learning course Soilse sought to build on the skills that people already had. By creating an academic milieu, where the emphasis was on education rather than recovery it gave people a taste of the reality that would face them when they began a college or university course. In other words the course was designed to provide a learning methodology known as ‘Situated Practice’ (SP). The New London Group describe SP as:

...the part of pedagogy that is constituted by immersion in meaningful practices within a community of learners who are capable of playing multiple and different roles based on their backgrounds and experiences. The community must include experts, people who have mastered certain practices. Minimally, it must include expert novices, people who are experts at learning new domains in some depth. Such experts can guide learners, serving as mentors and designers of their learning processes. This aspect of the curriculum needs to recruit learners’ previous and current experiences, as well as their extra-school communities and discourses, as an integral part of the learning experience.

(Cazden et al, 1996, p. 85)

The Soilse/NUIM return to learning course took this approach and provided the expertise that the New London Group espouse. The qualifications of the staff who designed and delivered the programme included two PhDs (Philosophy and History) one MA and one post graduate diploma in (Adult/ Career Guidance) and a BA Community Studies with a background in adult education and literacy provision. In late April 2008 agreement was reached with NUI Maynooth to run a return to learning course and preparations began.

A course outline and timetable were drawn up:

**Figure 1 Soilse/NUI Maynooth Return to Learning timetable.**

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
10am	Sociology	English	Study day	Computer Applications	Personal Development
11am	Study skills	English	Study day	Recovery Support	Study Skills
12noon	Lunch	Lunch	Study day	Lunch	Lunch

In relation to the recruitment criteria for the RtL places were offered to people who could benefit most both in educational and recovery terms.

A list of candidates who met the qualifying criteria was drawn up and contact was made with former Soilse participants and some participants who were due to complete the Soilse programme at the end of May 2008. This mix of people at different stages of their recovery became, inadvertently, one of the most positive aspects of the programme. Offers of places were made to 14 people and on the 3rd June 2008 11 people began the first Soilse/NUIM Return to Learning course (to be joined by one other person on 16 June).

### The Participants

The lived experiences of the participants played a crucial role in marrying both components of the course together and this re-enforced Soilse’s philosophy of adult education as a transformative practice (Mezirow, 1978, pp 100-110) which endeavours to build on all formal, non-formal and informal learning<sup>16</sup>. The dynamic within the group became part of the transformative experience for participants at early stages of their recovery and it is worth, at this point, looking at the profile of the people who took part in the course.

Of the twelve participants 10 were male and 2 female, the age range was from 22 to 48 years old. School leaving ages ranged from 11 years old to 18 years with the average being 15.5. Three people had been using drugs for over 20 years, three people for 15 years, two people for 13 years, one person each for 8, 9, 10 and 12 years respectively. The length of time people were drug free ranged from

<sup>16</sup> As such this approach corresponds with that of European Commission’s approach to lifelong learning by adults as individuals and as members of the community and society (Eneroth, 2008, p. 229).

4 months to 10 years with the majority of people in the 18-24 months category. 11 people used Narcotics Anonymous, 1 Alcoholics Anonymous as their recovery supports while 4 used Aftercare, 2 saw counsellors and 1 used Cocaine Anonymous as further support. 11 were unemployed for various lengths of time up to 15 years (one person had never worked) and one worked part-time. Nine of the twelve had criminal convictions.

Over the course of the next fifteen weeks this group became another level of support for each other and provided a source of inspiration for the groups completing the FETAC course in the Soilse North Frederick St. facility.

### Integrating Literacy

When the Soilse/NUIM Return to Learning course was under consideration one of the primary motives for pursuing the programme was to try to raise the levels of literacy of the participants before they embarked upon a college course<sup>17</sup>. Soilse staff had long recognised that progression from FETAC level 3 / 4 to PLC FETAC level 5 and university requirements was a major hurdle for people to negotiate. It was accepted, right from the outset, that an integrated literacy approach was to be built into the programme. Educators argue that integrated instruction is more effective because it incorporates real world tasks and not those developed solely for schooling. It is regarded as more meaningful because knowledge construction is an integrative process.

Integrated instruction is also considered more efficient because it allows for greater curriculum coverage (Cazden et al; Sticht). It was fortunate that at an early course design stage meeting with Josephine Finn, Head of Continuing Education in the Department of Adult and Community Education NUIM, the idea of the methodological approach to be taken was that of Functional Context Education (FCE). This approach is seen as serving a number of purposes specific to the adult learner. It was recognised by the Soilse staff as having a particular resonance for people in recovery. As Smith explains:

The current functional conceptions of literacy view reading and writing as enabling individuals to accomplish things in life, to be productive, and to provide for oneself and one’s family. This view also implies that literacy contributed to individual growth and development, and to a sense of wellbeing and personal satisfaction

(2009, p. 603)

<sup>17</sup> NALA’s guidelines for integrating literacy include a literacy facilitator, monitoring system, materials, personnel, premises, induction programme, assessment programme, specialist assessment etc. All of these criteria were included in Soilse/NUIM RtL programme and below is a list of these and other tools for integrating literacy that the return to learning staff found useful:

Sticht is persuasive in his advocacy of this type of learning:

Regarding literacy, a general thesis is that the idea that literacy is something one 'gets' in one program, which is then 'applied' in another is misleading. Rather, (in terms of Functional Context Education) it is argued that literacy is developed while it is being applied. This means that for the large numbers of students in secondary or out-of-school programs for youth or adults who read between the fifth and ninth grade levels, literacy and content skills education can be integrated. Through this means, the need for special "remedial" literacy programs to get students to "prerequisite" levels of literacy before they are permitted to study the "real thing," are obviated. (1997, p. 58).

By adopting the CFE approach right from the introductory sociology session we were able to achieve two things. Firstly, we engaged the students in a subject about which none of them had any in-depth knowledge thus creating a level playing field. At the same time they dealt with concepts from everyday life with which they were familiar such as family, school, the justice system and religion etc. In this way the connection was made between academic subjects and personal experiences (Stitch, 1997, p.6; p 57)

Secondly, by providing them, in the session, with a provocative yet accessible, handout of a cartoon<sup>18</sup> in which Margaret Thatcher denied the very idea of society (Osborne and Van Loon, 2004, p. 6) opinions slowly emerged, (Thatcher holds a special place for many Irish people) and a space began to be established as a safe place to voice ideas and enter into debates. This encouraged engagement within the group and by the group with the subject which is again an important aspect of Situated Practice pedagogy:

There is ample evidence that people do not learn anything well unless they are both motivated to learn and believe that they will be able to use and function with what they are learning in some way that is in their interest. Thus, the Situated Practice that constitutes the immersion aspect of pedagogy must crucially consider the affective and sociocultural needs and identities of all learners. It must also constitute an arena in which all learners are secure in taking risks and trusting the guidance of others - peers and teachers.

(Cazden et al, p. 85)

<sup>18</sup> The use of graphics, cartoons, film, television shows etc., corresponds to the broadening of the concept of literacy to include multi-literacies espoused by the New London Group and the idea of literacy as a social practice as proposed by Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič

This approach underwrites both the therapeutic and educational programmes carried out in Soilse.

### **Induction**

In session one participants were given an induction pack which consisted of a plastic folder, A4 writing pad, hard back journal, a ring binder, a pen and a pocket dictionary. This last item was particularly useful as it led to a discussion as to who uses dictionaries. Initially it was argued that it was mainly stupid people or 'thicks who didn't know words' who would make the most use of a dictionary. As the discussion progressed it emerged that doctors would use medical dictionaries, writers might also use dictionaries and neither of these categories could be classed as 'thicks'.

Therefore within a matter of minutes the counter intuitive perception of a dictionary user had developed. It was acknowledged that it was not the stupid but people with some power who would use dictionaries most. This was the beginning of what we would attempt to do achieve in the sociology class, to take the commonplace, and mundane and make them strange and worthy of reconsideration.

### **Achievable Goals**

On day one it was stated that many difficult sociological concepts would be encountered. However, with some effort and the support from the Soilse staff there was nothing that any individual would be unable to come to terms with. From the outset the point was stressed that time management and organisation were key in completing the course. The goals set by the staff were achievable. At this point new words, jargon and technical terms were cited by the students as being their most worrying concern. However, it was made clear that this was part of the learning process and that the language and concepts of sociology would become familiar to each as time progressed. Again the point was made that the class was embarking on something new. Previous experiences of the education system would have limited influence on how the individual would perform on the RtL course.

For most of the students this was the first time that politics, economics, history and society were discussed in any great depth in such a forum. It did not take long to discover how these forces shaped their own lives. The use of *Animal Farm* as the core text on the English module reinforced and reiterated new concepts about politics and the stratification of society that had been discovered in sociology class.

In the first number of weeks there was a palpable sense of excitement among the group members with words and phrases such as anomie, alienation, modernisation, globalisation, sociological mindfulness, social construction and discourse placed on the ‘new word’ notice board and used by the students. There was, also, the unforeseen consequence of the group being regarded positively. It became accepted that it was the next logical step for the other Soilse groups who were eager to partake in future RtL courses. This outcome, in microcosm, accords to the externality effect of the cumulative mechanism of education on wellbeing as discussed by Desjardins (2008, p. 28).

### Focus on Individual Needs

One of the National Adult Literacy Association’s (NALA) criteria is to give each individual a plan as part of the integrating literacy programme. This was done for individuals who showed they had literacy difficulties which accounted for five of the twelve people involved. Soilse’s literacy tutor (Joyce Gough) worked extremely closely with individuals, as in fact all of the tutors did.

This focus of attention became a feature of the programme. A weekly course providers’ meeting developed into an exercise in micro-management where an individual’s progress was assessed and areas of weakness identified. Gough had also drawn up an assessment table which asked each of the participants to evaluate their levels of ability at the beginning of the course; again in the middle of the course and finally at the end, it formed part of what became known as the College Readiness Matrix. Three participants were given one to one tuition. One of these same three was given extra tuition once a week provided by an outside tutor who came to Soilse. For another participant English was his second language and he had extra tuition to prepare him for the Cambridge English Exams.

Figure 2: College Readiness Indicators Matrix.

Indicators	College readiness indicators	Individual college readiness assessment	Initial literacy assessment. Progress literacy assessment. Final literacy assessment.	Specific learning difficulty assessment. Specialist assessment.
Language	Dictionaries for each student	New words notice boards. Glossaries in back of Learning Journals	Sentence starts, essay opening lines. Removing the subjective ‘I’.	Bibliography and Referencing
Performance	Language Games	Reading aloud	Presentations	Lecture and Library tour NUI Maynooth.
Discipline and Organisation	Student Handbook	Time tables Study time.	Notebooks and Folders	Learning Journals.
Study Skills	VAK tests	Mind-mapping	Reading, scanning, skimming, reading in depth.	Computer Skills
Miscellaneous		Individual library visits.	Film and DVD.	Class Handouts.

On Gough's recommendation an appointment was arranged for one participant to attend a Psychological Assessment where dyslexia was confirmed. The usual accommodations were then put in place whereby extensions to deadlines and the use of a Dictaphone were allowed. This person also used Soile's education development worker as a scribe for two of the assignments which formed part of the course requirements of four written assignments, a sociology essay, an English essay, a personal project (sociology) and a learning journal. The core text in the English class was, as has been noted above with *Animal Farm*. Participants were given a chapter to read every week. That then formed the basis for class discussion and textual analysis which included punctuation; spelling; tenses; homophones; use of apostrophes; sentence structure and paragraphing etc. It also included approaches to writing summaries, reviews, a film review and poetry. Of critical importance was the use of feedback of the draft assignments (see below p 12.)

### **A Sociological Context**

As has been indicated elsewhere the sociology module was designed to engage people in thinking about topics that directly affect their lives yet for the most part go unnoticed by the individual. The course incorporated an overview of the history and development of the discipline of sociology and the main concepts that sociologists are interested in such as processes of change, modernisation, globalisation and industrialisation, etc.

It also undertook a critique of the taken for granted assumptions that predominate in Western society e.g. the universal application of democracy, individualism and consumerism. The development of both functionalism and conflict theory were explored and these schools of thought were then employed to examine processes, phenomena and objects from everyday life that everybody was familiar with such as family, school, socialisation, justice, language, nationalism, identity, etc. The core texts were Schwalbe's *The Sociologically Examined Life: pieces of the conversation* and Giddens' *Sociology*.

Schwalbe was chosen because it is free of jargon and sociological language; its strength lies in its emphasis upon self-reflection and critical awareness and in the numerous examples from everyday life that can be viewed through a sociological lens. Schwalbe gets people thinking like a sociologist without them realising it. Giddens was chosen for exactly the opposite purpose he describes and uses the language of classical sociology and this was the students' first introduction to people like Durkheim, Marx and Weber.

Study skills were integrated to a degree into the sociology class which gave the tutor the freedom to switch between theory and application to the assignments in hand.. Initially, however, much of the time was spent allaying people's fears about course requirements and the individual's ability to meet these. The introductory session concentrated on the twin foundations for successful study, discipline and organisation, as well as a description of the course content. A copy of Schwalbe chapter 1 was handed out with the instruction that this was to be summarized 200-300 words for the following week.

This exercise caused some concern because people were afraid that they 'couldn't do it'; they 'didn't know what to do'; or that they would 'get it wrong'. These anxieties were expected and were ameliorated by getting the participants to complete the NALA Learning in Practice work-sheets 'Looking at our own experiences of learning' and 'Exploring the learning process' (the second of which had been slightly modified). It was obvious that past experiences of learning had to be exorcised in order for people to move on and it was also very necessary to let the students know that it was the process rather than the result that is important. Handholding, at this early stage, is extremely important but by getting people to write from the beginning a baseline for criticism and feedback was established.

An emphasis was laid on the need to draw up a realistic time-table as a way of putting structure on the participants' week. In the early weeks of the course the students did not take this requirement seriously, however once it was pointed out that it was to be incorporated into their recovery after-care plan with recovery supports i.e. Narcotics Anonymous meetings, AA meetings and counselling sessions forming the basis around which all of the rest of the week was to be planned, it then became more real and was considered useful. Week two of the sociology class saw all of the students with a summary of chapter 1 of Schwalbe's book and a lot of nervous people who were afraid that they did not do the exercise correctly.

The study skills session which took place on the following Friday began by handing back the summaries that they had submitted previously with corrections made to each piece. There was a short one or two line positive critical comment at the foot of each. The use of positive but honest feedback drew out some of the fear that people had about putting pen to paper and committing their opinions in writing. This aspect of evaluation has been explored by the

### **New London Group:**

Within this aspect of pedagogy (Situating Practice), evaluation, we believe, should never be used to judge, but should be used developmentally, to guide learners to the experiences and the assistance they need to develop further as members of the community capable of drawing on, and ultimately contributing to, the full range of its resources (Cadzen et al, p. 85)

The idea that, in relation to the concerns of mainstream society, one's opinions matter and can be taken seriously was a new experience for most of the class. This validation is an essential element in adult education. Self-effacement is very common in adults returning to education and a verbal comment can easily be passed off as a joke, or misunderstanding. The permanency of the written word carries with it a degree of commitment. This session recalled the questions asked about Schwalbe's chapter and reinforced how important it is to read with a question in mind in order to fully engage with the material. It also allowed the class to look at different types of reading i.e. scanning, skimming, and reading in depth.

Each week a chapter of either Giddens or Schwalbe was given to the class to read for the following week. The option of reading aloud was taken up and to the tutor's surprise it was always the individuals who had the most difficulty reading that were first to volunteer. It was made clear during individual consultation with students that those with reading difficulties began reading the chapters as soon as they got them. They might read it four or five times before they had to attend class the following week. The same individuals were the first to read aloud in English class. Whenever a new word arose it was noted and a student would be asked to look it up in the dictionary. Each reader was thanked for their efforts by the whole class which went some way to define the class as a community. This type of appreciation for the efforts of the group members is something that the participants were familiar with from their therapeutic sessions in drug treatment and their experiences in the fellowships of Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous.

Due to the length of the course we did not have a lot of time before the assignments were handed out. The sociology essays were based upon Schwalbe's first two chapters and chapter 1 and 3 of Giddens' book. A first draft deadline was set for mid-July. At this time one participant had a 'slip' and dropped out of the course. This participant linked straight back in with his key worker and a suit-

able care plan was put in place for him. If for no other reason this showed the value of the RtL as adding another dimension to the continuum of care.

The draft for the first sociology assignment highlighted many shortcomings in the students' understanding of the brief and what was expected by way of referencing and bibliography. However, the most important result was that out of the eleven remaining students, all had handed in a draft. This gave both the sociology tutor and the computer tutor a baseline to work from with each individual. A lengthy commentary was handed back to the student and areas of particular concern were pointed out. Work on bibliography skills and referencing began in earnest.

A deadline of Friday 1 August was set for the completed essay and nine of the eleven remaining participants submitted. For a first attempt at essay writing the standard of work was high and it focused the work of the participants. The following week the students were given a provisional grade and a comment sheet. The evaluation of the whole process of essay writing was undertaken. This was a useful piece of work as it opened up a discussion around the feelings attached to accomplishment and failure. Both of these phenomena hold risks for the recovering person. The sense of achievement that most people said that they felt on completing the essay brings with it a feeling of entitlement or reward.

Words and phrases such as 'very elated', 'satisfied', 'relief' etc. were used to describe their feelings. From experience, Soile staff recognise that this has led people to reward themselves by celebrating with alcohol or other substances which can then become the motivation for continued action until the reward becomes more significant than the actual work. The other side of the coin failure or rather 'fear of failure' is often the source of procrastination and an accompanying sense of guilt and enormous stress. In this situation the recovering person can rationalise a 'slip' or a 'relapse' by assuming their addicted default position. The phrase 'I'm an addict, what do they expect' is well known to people working in addiction services.

The overriding feeling in the class however, was one of great relief and a sense of achievement by all but this relief was short-lived by the realisation that another assignment was due. At this point there was some attrition within the class. Three students left because of either personal commitments, child care issues, or the pressure of the work-load. However, this was still a positive result for

Soilse as it has provided an indication to the staff of people who might need further support as the college year progresses.

Besides the core modules of English and Sociology the other subjects covered were recovery support, self development for learning and IT skills. This last module was delivered by Sinead McNerney one of Soilse's career guidance counsellors and its inclusion was meant to evaluate participants' existing I.T. skills and to consolidate and build on them. The content of the module included setting up E-mail accounts; using the internet efficiently (search engines, web addresses etc); I.T. skills for essay/assignment writing; M.S. Word – basic skills e.g. alignment of text, setting margins, basic formatting of text (bold, italics, underline, etc), line spacing, using thesaurus, spell check, word count and writing a bibliography.

The modules Recovery Support and Self-development for Learning were delivered by Aoife Kerrigan and Julie Keating respectively. The latter was designed to focus students awareness on the personal skills needed to cope with returning to education. The aim was to increase students' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses in this area and to encourage preparation for the some of the personal challenges they were likely to face.

The content was informed by feedback from teaching and guidance personnel in colleges of further education attended by past participants of Soilse. This was by way of an email request to college staff who had attended the Soilse Spring 2008 seminar on 'Supporting Adult Learners in Recovery.' A list of desirable personal skills was then compiled from the feedback. The students were asked to rate themselves on each of these and indicate which they would like to work on. From the students' answers an initial list of priority areas was developed:

1. Dealing with conflict;
2. Maintaining motivation;
3. Giving and receiving help to and from other students;
4. Challenging self- limiting beliefs;
5. Concentrating;
6. Self esteem and self confidence.

Sessions were then planned to cover these areas. In practice this became a loose framework as sessions tended to develop from material that arose at the previous session.

By the end of the course all of the above and other items on the original list had been explored. Participants were asked to rate themselves on their personal skills again at the end course. All reported increases in competency across the board. It was discovered that the course as a whole and not merely the self-development modules that helped participants to improve in self-confidence, esteem and challenge their self-limiting beliefs. The value of the self-development module was in raising self-awareness and awareness of the personal challenges each would face. Another benefit was that it highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of each student for the staff team.

The decision to include a recovery support session in the Return to Learning timetable was based on feedback from former Soilse participants about the personal challenges experienced in the course. Their returning to further education and training, and the ways in which these challenges could undermine the recovery process and contribute to a decision to discontinue/drop out of follow on courses.

Through the provision of a facilitated peer support forum participants could discuss recovery related issues, their experience of the Return to Learning course, and their thoughts, feelings, and concerns about prospective college courses. The weekly group session was intended to support progression, promote recovery balance and to serve a relapse prevention function. The format for this module, which was facilitated by Aoife Kerrigan (HSE education officer) was a one hour, reflective/experiential peer support circle with emphasis placed on respectful and constructive feedback.

## Conclusion

Of the 12 people who started the course 7 people finished. Eleven people completed the first Sociology essay, 7 completed the English assignment, 7 completed the Personal Project and 7 completed the Learning Journal). In September 2008 eleven of the twelve had gone onto further education, nine onto CDVEC colleges, one onto the Trinity Access Programme and one person was working, while waiting to take part in a FÁS training programme for people with dyslexia. The person who did not go on failed to do so only because the course to which he had chosen was cancelled, however he stayed linked in with Soilse and began an arts degree in UCD in 2009.

For participants who have returned to some form of education the opportunity to acquire the skills necessary to succeed in college were recognised as making this transition less daunting. Also, the past participants of the RtL have stated that the course has not only helped them to cope with the academic demands of course work but have been able to take a leading role among their peers and safeguard their recovery.

The fraught nature of recovery from drug and alcohol addiction means that not all the participants have remained drug free. As has been mentioned earlier one participant relapsed during the programme and staff were able to link that individual straight back in to the necessary services where he again became drug free and has embarked upon a undergraduate degree. In the duration since the course finished there has been two confirmed relapses and one unconfirmed. The follow up work done by Soilse's aftercare team has attempted to maintain a relationship with these individuals in order to help them to re-engage with addiction services. Therefore an essential ingredient in the success or otherwise of the Soilse/NUIM RtL is the twin track approach that is necessary in educating recovering people. The primary concern must be to keep the person's recovery as solid as possible, without this the risk of relapse becomes extremely high. Recovery is the cornerstone upon which all other progress must be founded. However, it is through educational progression and the accumulation of social and cultural capital (knowledge) that the individual will re-integrate into mainstream society, thereby consolidating their recovery.

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