

Introduction to a seminar on the State of the Field in Community Learning and Development on Friday 13th June 2024, University of Edinburgh.

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Today's seminar comes out of the concerns the organisers of this event have about the narrow framing of the current independent review of Community Learning & Development. For example, the overview of the review states:

Community Learning and Development (CLD) is a professional practice within education with delivery stretching across all stages of lifelong learning...The purpose of CLD is to provide early intervention and prevention to those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, inequality of opportunity within the education and skills system. (Scottish Government, No Date)

As a result of this perceived narrowing of the scope of CLD work, four of us working on CLD programmes in Scottish universities wrote an open letter (Galloway et al, 2024) to express our concerns and invite support from the field of practice. Our concerns are summarised by this extract from the letter:

We argue that the learning and development components of CLD cannot be separated without losing the ethos and values of the profession in relation to social justice. We also note that within the terms of reference, 'educational' refers explicitly to learning and skills for employment, neglecting longstanding broader social justice aims for lifelong, life wide education as recognised formally by the Scottish Government.

Part of our concern was how far the current Review was from the broad aims and ambitions of the 1975 Alexander Report. The Alexander Report was in our minds, as the 50th anniversary

will be in 2025. But, more importantly, we think the Report is still very relevant to how we understand what CLD is today, as it helped to establish the core concepts which characterise our sense of identity and purpose, or as Mackie et al argue (2012, p.396), set the discourse of CLD. They draw on Foucault to define a discourse as

‘... more or less coherent constellations of language and conceptual frameworks, expressed in accepted or conventional ways of knowing, constitute individuals and groups of human beings as subjects’.

They use Foucault to show that the founder of a discourse, or a professional discipline, can be identified by the ‘ritual pilgrimage’ back to an original text. For example, biology is traced back to Darwin’s book *The Origin of The Species* or economics back to Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. In relation to the Alexander report, Mackie et al (2012: 397) assert that, ‘...an account of the genealogy of [CLD] in Scotland begins with this text’. Therefore, given the importance of the Alexander report to how we think about and understand CLD today, I thought it would be worthwhile reminding ourselves what its key aims and ideas were.

Perhaps the most well-known influence of the Report was organisational change, bringing together what were separate adult education and youth & community services into a new educational profession named Community Education. The Report was driven by two fundamental impulses, both of which can be interpreted as asserting the promotion of social justice. The first impulse was to challenge poverty and disadvantage through participation in education by creating a unified Community Education Service which would increase the reach, relevance and access to adult education and, at the same time, promoting a more intellectual and rigorous educational approach to youth & community services.

The second impulse was to promote human flourishing, for example as stated in the report:

'We have acted on our belief that education enables man [sic] to increase his understanding of his own nature, to develop to the full his potentialities and to participate in the shaping of his own future' (Scottish Education Department, 1975: 35).

There were four specific aims which helped establish them as axioms of practice; that is, something which is created and then accepted as self-evidently true. These aims were: reaffirmation of the individual; effective use of resources; foster the pluralistic society and education for change. These aims were also consistent with, and reflected international educational developments of the time, such as what became known as the Faure Report, UNESCO's influential 1972 paper titled *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow* which argued that education should promote solidarity, democracy and contribute to the good society (See Biesta 2021).

Let's explore in some detail Alexander's four aims (See Scottish Education Department: 25-33).

1. *Reaffirmation of individuality*. Whilst it seems like almost a Thatcherite slogan, it was not. The Report argued that people in modern society risk isolation and alienation due to the dehumanizing effect of work or the impact of the media. Although written in 1975, it perhaps has some relevance today. As a result, through education we should build people's capacity for a full and rich personal and social life and work to reduce the impediments to this. A claim of education to become fully human?

2. *Effective use of resources.* Here the focus was on an analysis that the modern economy had an emphasis on consumerism, and there was a complexity of technological developments. But people's full understanding of this complexity of technology is hidden by 'verbiage and hyperbole'. People need to be able to understand and use this technology and resources, and so there needs to be consumer education. It was arguing that people need to understand so we can use all this technology, but the emphasis was on control and action. That is, education to help shift power in favour of individuals and communities against corporate interests.

3. *Fostering the pluralistic society.* Here there needs to be educational support to help people and groups fulfill their rights to express their opinions and even to support opposition to and criticism of the government of the day and its policy agenda. There was also reference here to education to support and promote trade unions and industrial relations and support to immigrants and voluntary organisations.

4. *Education for change.* Here there was an emphasis made to community development and helping people act together to tackle the problems they face in their communities and lives. There was also reference made to promoting a second chance to learn for adults. Furthermore, we need to promote social and political education so we can 'make real the participating democracy'. Also, an assertion of a wider curriculum which helped people understand the complexity of the relationship between science, technology, culture and society. If not, then it was argued that people will feel they are the recipients of change, rather than 'wills and controls' change. I can see the similarity between this aspiration and George Davie's notion of the 'democratic intellect'. For example, a democratic intellect reflects a society where there is a 'conscious intellectual rapport between the members of a given society' (Davie 1991: 59-65).

Of course, these aims reflect the wider social and political milieux of mid 1970s Scotland. But what relevance does Alexander and these aims have today? We all know that times and policy change and what CLD is will always, in part, reflect and be shaped by the prevailing social, economic and political context and policy focus. Nonetheless as Mackie et al (2012: 406) argue, 'While discontinuities in discourse are evident, a range of features persist through change. Many of these were laid down as axioms of the original discourse in the Alexander committee's foundational work in 1975'. So, what are these persistent features? I would suggest they include an emphasis on the following:

- Seeing education as lifewide and life long
- Non/informal education, that is social constructivist approaches to curriculum construction, that is, education that is student centered.
- The promotion of democracy and active citizenship for participation in decision making.
- Empowerment and self-determination, to promote individual and group agency. To help people think critically about the world and act to change it.
- The social and transformative purpose of education and working towards social justice.

I would argue that most of these features of our purpose and practice are, rhetorically at least, reflected in various government documents and statements about the purpose of CLD. They are also found on the website of the CLD Standards Council for Scotland, in our National Occupational Standards and, for example, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education subject benchmark statement of youth and community work.

This then brings me back to the concerns we had with the framing of the independent review. The current policy context for CLD, and education, is framed by neoliberalism, austerity and

the associated managerial and performative culture which means there is a narrowing down of the scope and purpose of education to little more than gaining the skills for work and employability. For example, as a recent UNESCO (2022: 26) report asserts:

‘...a deepening of the tendency among Member States to adopt a limited interpretation of [adult learning & education (ALE)], one that focuses largely or exclusively on its instrumental value, particularly in terms of enhancing employability and promoting economic growth. This approach undervalues the wider and deeper benefits of ALE in terms of health, wellbeing, social cohesion and – as this report specifically emphasizes – civic participation. It also largely ignores the huge potential of ALE to help redress social inequity, gender inequality and exclusion.’

Although this report is about adult learning in particular, I think its criticism is relevant to all of CLD. I would argue that we live in a world of considerable inequality, injustice and exploitation. This is both a concern, but also a danger. A danger in that we risk being uncritically incorporated into a government policy agenda that cuts across or limits what we see as our transformative and social justice orientated core aims and purpose as community educators.

In conclusion, the danger of an overemphasis on education for employability is convincingly summarised for me by the following quotation from David Alexander (1994: 49), my old tutor from the University of Edinburgh, and I’ll end on his words:

It is no part of a democratic educator’s task to create educational and training ghettos or cognitively emasculated hovels which assist in inuring the materially poor to exploitation and poverty or to develop vocational skills programmes which condemn others to being the hewers of wood and the drawers of water.

References

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