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Disrupting fatalism: what can community-based learning and development do?

Lyn Tett, Professor Emerita, University of Edinburgh

Introduction

This contribution draws on a talk I gave at Edinburgh University on 16th May 2025 that was reviewing the role of the Alexander Report on its 50th anniversary. My talk initially drew on the two main underpinning impulses of the Report: to challenge poverty and disadvantage through participation in education and to promote human flourishing. For example, the report argued: '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). I suggested that, to some extent, these principles (apart from the sexist language!) were still prominent in community-based learning and development (CLD) practice, and then briefly explored the benefits of CLD. This exploration was based on an article, published in CONCEPT (see Tett, 2023), that reviewed published research and found that CLD enabled participants in its community-based adult learning to:

- Engage with, and make progress in, learning
- Develop resilience, self-confidence, and social capital because of participation in learning
- Reduce the attainment gap through supporting parents and their children in family learning programmes
- Make a positive impact on health and well-being.

Overall, this review of research showed that participating in CLD has a positive impact especially on those adults that are furthest from learning and socio-economically disadvantaged. Its contribution is wide-ranging and goes across the policy areas of education, employability, social justice and health and well-being. These are excellent achievements, and it is important that they are celebrated and widely acknowledged. However, currently many

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practitioners are despondent about their achievements, and some communities seem to find positive change difficult to imagine. These feelings are exacerbated by the dominant discourse that excludes, marginalises and oppresses other realities by suggesting that there are no alternatives to the current way of doing things, and this can take away hope as well as silencing protest and change. So, this article is focused on how we might create spaces in our practice for human flourishing that will enable us to resist this negative discourse.

When practitioners are facing difficulties in finding spaces to really engage with communities it is tempting to give into the dominant neoliberal regime. This is especially the case when funders set outcomes for courses that are measurable solely in economic terms. Using these kinds of measurements has the effect of narrowing the curriculum because it becomes focused on the economic worth of the individual, with the emphasis on 'up-skilling' people so that they become more employable. Because this approach presupposes that the individual lacks skills it ignores their knowledge and so emphasises their limitations rather than their expertise. The result is a narrow conceptualisation of the purpose of education as the provider of 'employment ready' workers. This then leads to a curriculum that is focused on delivering the information-processing skills claimed to be necessary for employment and narrow outcomes are prioritised. Research (e.g. UNESCO, 2022) shows, however, that learners are more interested in building their confidence because this enables them to do things differently and apply what they have learnt in different contexts. This means we need to prioritise a learner focused approach and broaden the curriculum so that it reflects participants own wishes.

Resisting neoliberalism

I think that there are several ways in which we can resist this narrow curriculum and find other ways of working towards human flourishing. The first is through using critical pedagogical and assessment approaches. These approaches should challenge and support learners to help them develop a critical stance on their current situation, rather than accepting it. The pedagogical approaches that are more effective are those based on the view that people have important 'funds of knowledge' (González et al, 2005). This approach can help learners to develop the effective strategies and skills they already use rather than being seen as having individual deficits that need to be corrected. It is effective because it focuses on the resources and practices that learners contribute to education and so builds on, rather than denigrating,

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their expertise. When an 'inquiry method of teaching' (González et al, 2005, p. 19) is used, that recognizes the cultural practices, lived experiences, and daily activities of learners, participants become actively involved in developing a curriculum. This means that their experiences become validated as legitimate sources of knowledge both inside and outside of programmes. For example, a practitioner working in a project for homeless people started off by asking the participants about their housing issues or how they had dealt with social services so that their lived experience could be used to build on their shared knowledge.

Moreover, when participants can influence the curriculum to make it relevant to their own experiences this can provide valuable resources for their emotional and social development (Baquedano-López et al, 2013). For example, practitioners reported that many learners valued their growth in confidence to make changes in their lives above increasing their skills. Focusing on a broad curriculum also shifts more agency to learners as meaning-makers rather than receivers of expert instruction. For example, a practitioner working in a family learning project, always worked from the strengths of learners so started from what the parents knew and asked them to share their knowledge with each other. The result was that participants not only improved their skills but also changed their negative attitudes about themselves and learnt how to focus on what was positive.

Another strategy is to create a space for the plurality of knowledge and experiences that avoids binary thinking, and this means treating learners as citizens with rights rather than empty vessels to be filled up (Freire, 1993). For example, the practitioner in a project focused on helping participants to get qualifications started with a discussion on why the participants thought they didn't get qualifications when they were at school and what they thought could be done about it. This approach put the emphasis back on systemic, rather than individual, failures. Following this discussion the participants all contributed points about how they might change education and that had the dual impact of building their skills as well as improving their self-esteem. It also changed the discourse from seeing knowledge as an economic commodity and instead focused on knowledge as a way of expressing critical opinions about the world.

Clearly, it is important to resist managerial discourses that are detrimental to learners, especially in relation to pedagogy and assessment that focus on narrow outcomes rather than learners' own goals. Practitioners can, to some extent, resist these ideologies by using a values-based pedagogy that guides critical pedagogical practices based on a commitment to social

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justice. The practitioners I interviewed used "workarounds", situations in which practitioners seize, rather than seek, discretion when "policies were seen to be unworkable in practice, or in conflict with professional and philosophical values" (Smythe, 2015, 6). They contested ideologies that constructed learners as problems, rather than people with important knowledge and enabled participants to make the curriculum relevant to their lived experiences (Freire, 1993). Taken together these acts can disrupt the "ideology of fatalism [and instead enable people] to dream. Without … dreams, there is no human existence, without dreams, there are no more human beings" (Freire, 2014 p. 33).

Resisting dominant ideologies, however, has emotional costs and takes up valuable time (Tett, 2024). For example, one practitioner reported that because more funding was coming via foundations with specific targets this created competition amongst organizations and could lead to more precarious work for tutors. Despite these difficulties, practitioners were highly motivated to resist narrow outcomes and seize the agenda when they thought policies conflicted with their professional and philosophical values. Some were helped to construct a more open curriculum by supportive colleagues that shared their values and so could be trusted to help them make good judgements. Although these changes were generally quite small, they did enable practitioners to assert their agency in ways that gave them some resources for hope. For example, a practitioner in a literacy project reported that she was helped to stick to her value base because of her passion for the job that gave her the courage to work in response to learners' goals. This was because all her experience told her that this was the right kind of approach that was going to help people to learn. Others found creative ways of delivering outcomes including making use of impact statements from learners. These showed the changes in the whole of learners' lives, including gains in self-confidence, and these stories were powerful ways of explaining the overall impact experienced by learners to funders and policy makers.

Making these changes was not easy but practitioners managed to keep going with the support of their colleagues. For some, having the opportunity to exchange experiences and opinions across different projects helped to develop a sense of solidarity that could be built on, sometimes leading to collective action. Finding support from enthusiastic colleagues and inspiration from the changes that learners experienced was another way in which practitioners were able to keep going in challenging circumstances. A few had developed partnerships and good working relations with other organisations such as the NHS, and these relationships not

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only provided funding that was less proscribed but also support for more innovative work. A very important, but time consuming, way of keeping going was documenting learners' experiences through print or web-based resources. This offered alternative concepts and analyses that could be widely shared with a variety of audiences including learners, practitioners and policy makers and showcased the work of CLD. It also helped develop strategic thinking.

Discussion and conclusion

Raymond Williams, (1977) has argued that many possible routes are within our reach if, even when constrained by narrow curricula, we can open spaces for critical reflection and dialogue and imagine new forms of teaching and learning that make education relevant. New meanings and values can then emerge that spark different ways of thinking, kindling the desire to learn more deeply and explore further. Such learning could result in a redesigned education system that provides full "human relevance and control…[and] emphasises not the ladder but the common highway, … [because every person's] ignorance diminishes me, and every [person]'s skill is a common gain of breath" (Williams 1989,15).

Getting to this point though, means that we must engage with a variety of ways of challenging the dominant ideology of neoliberalism. Williams (1977) suggests that dominant discourses "select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice [yet some] experiences, meanings, and values are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of some residue – cultural as well as social - of some previous social and cultural institution or formation" (125). These residual resources were formed in the past but are still "active in the cultural process …as an effective element of the present … [through people's] practical consciousness" (123). In addition to these resources there is "emergent" culture which carries new meanings and values, and "depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptions of forms" (126).

The practitioners quoted here have shown that they are challenging neo-liberalism using residual resources built up through value-based shared practice. They were able, by building on learners' experience and sharing their knowledge, to make institutional systems and spaces of government more transparent and thus contestable. There is also an emergent culture that seeks to offer more critical programmes of learning and action that is also being built. CLD

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practitioners can draw on sources of support to maintain their "activist craft" (Costa et al., 2021), including their expertise in pedagogies based on the idea that the whole human is involved in learning. Support stemmed from dialogue and mutual learning among learners and practitioners. Overall, practitioners' motivation to resist difficult or hostile messages enabled them "to create dialogic, emancipatory spaces which are affirming, positive and culturally sensitive for those participating in them" (Tett & Hamilton, 2019, 253). The ability to challenge existing discourses also came through forming alliances and professional cooperation that contradicted the imposed ideal of competition.

Yet, if we are to address lasting structural changes as social justice requires, we need to create larger alliances of like-minded groups. Is it possible to do that? I've suggested some steps that can be taken to promote social justice and human flourishing and hope that this will spark some ideas that might bring about positive change. In the end though, social justice requires that the impact of broader social and economic inequalities on participation in education must be addressed through structural changes rather than individual effort. This article has shown what can be done by practitioners and learners acting together, and that is a small step on the way to developing more lasting structural change and disrupting the ideology of fatalism.

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