

# Plugged in, switched on, but disconnected? Community, education and democracy

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## Introduction

This article was prompted by interviews conducted with three qualified and highly- experienced community education practitioners, and many informal conversations with others, about the opportunities and constraints presented by their current working environment. Although these practitioners work in Scotland, the nature of their concerns will no doubt be familiar to colleagues elsewhere - in particular, perhaps, the way in which contemporary policy frameworks claim to offer ever greater opportunities for democratic engagement. In this era of 'communicative plenty' (Ercan et al, 2019), communities are increasingly invited to have their say, advise, consent, and even co-design or deliver services. It is becoming apparent, however, that the extent and density of such endless forms of pseudo democracy may impede opportunities for the real thing, disconnecting all but the most compliant respondents. Indeed, we wonder if this may be its implicit function. Our title is intended to convey the reality of this paradoxical environment, arguing for urgent reconnection between communities, education and democracy.

Encouraging and enabling democratic participation has long been the primary objective of various forms of community-based education, confirmed by its status within key policy frameworks over time. In this sense, it could be regarded as plugged in to policy: switched on to the opportunities and constraints. The central problem with current configurations of community engagement, however, seems to be that they have become seriously disconnected from the wider politics of policy, amounting to no more than superficial feedback on predefined issues. The reality appears to be that those issues that matter most to communities, often exposed through the work of community-based education, are

simply not getting through to policymakers, leading to frustration, apathy and serious social division. In other words, the connection necessary for genuine democratic engagement with communities has become severely weakened, if not completely severed.

Given the precarious nature of the contemporary world, we argue that there has never been a more critical time for policymakers to connect genuinely with the public, and vice versa. Community education is ideally placed to help revive such democratic engagement: to cultivate in communities the capacity to understand, articulate, interrogate, advocate and challenge. The skills, contacts and knowledge developed over several decades should not be squandered on the kind of technocratic managerialism which currently passes for community engagement. Reconnection could hardly be more critical in such politically charged times!

### **Plugged in**

The advent of public participation in government policy in the UK goes back to the genesis of the post-war welfare state, justified at the time in various ways by different, often competing, interests. Ambivalence about its intentions were perhaps best summed up at the time by the idea of being both 'In and Against the State' (LEWRG, 1979). As intervention by the state in welfare intensified from the mid-twentieth century on, its role in relation to social life became a matter of increasing significance. Certainly, as the development of distinct welfare professions gathered pace, there was not only a commitment to personal service, but also a vested interest in more political understandings of community. As Yeo and Yeo (1988:246) put it: “‘the community’ and especially ‘the community as a whole’ were key phrases in the discourse of such people’. In an age of majority democracy, the community came to mean much more than simply the populace. It could be seen as the citizenry, ‘possessing, determining, licensing the legitimate interests of the nation’. In this way of thinking, the state became the embodiment and arbiter of the public good: the political expression of the community. This relationship has been reconstructed over time by the changing politics of the state within macro relations of power, though remnants remain, if only in the political imagination.

Since the 1960s 'the community solution' has been an important component of the policy repertoire partly or precisely because of its utility in addressing a range of problems, either as a distinct strategy (i.e. *as* policy) or attached to other relevant policies such as housing, health, education or social care (i.e. *in* policy). Its popularity emanates both from its general potential for responding to wider changes that require a new set of social relationships between the state, the economy and civil society, and its particular potential to address pressing social problems in both the short and longer term. The past two decades have seen a resurgence in participatory visions of democracy alongside efforts to strengthen the role of evidence in policy; in particular, to elevate the significance of 'lived experience'. Hill O'Connor et al (2023) argue, however, that there has been a tendency towards 'quantitative public engagement' rather than qualitative insights: towards endorsement rather than genuine engagement.

This enduring capacity to adjust and respond to diverse and changing demands has invested community with a 'survivability' which remains both an asset and a challenge. In some instances, it has been granted increased civic status as an alternative to 'top-down' services whilst budgets are reduced. In recent times it has, in some cases, been appropriated by the far right to suggest 'cultural obedience rather than solidarity' (Malik, 2026). Kate Pickett's observation, in her recent book *The Good Society: And How we Make it* (2026a), that 'the chronic stress caused by inequality places an untenable burden on community' is too often ignored in assessments of its value to policymakers. And inequality is increasing, with little serious comment. For example, a recent Oxfam report shows that the richest 0.1% of households hold untaxed assets equivalent to the total wealth of the poorest half of the global population (Oxfam, 2026). These optics are critically relevant.

Our starting point then is that community engagement is intrinsically ambivalent and contingent on other factors, not least wider material conditions. As a consequence, it has always embodied a complex combination of democratic aims and managerial objectives (Shaw, 2018): from government, to strengthen or legitimize policymaking through democratic engagement; from state institutions, to deliver policy within political and budgetary parameters; from professional bodies, projecting and

protecting established values and practices; from diverse community interests, some expressed, others latent - most recently, and worryingly, from the market. As Monbiot and Hutchison (2024) warn, the 'free' market 'casts us as *consumers* rather than *citizens*'. This sinister development goes largely unnoticed, but has profound consequences for democracy, and presents new challenges for its educational advocates in communities.

Professional community education, along with its certified university programmes of training, became acknowledged from the mid-sixties on as a distinctive practice of working in and with communities to enable them to respond effectively to changing policy contexts. Navigating the opportunities and dilemmas of democratic engagement at any given period has been a primary challenge: engagement on what basis? With what degree of autonomy? With what resources? These remain the central preoccupations, as seen from our interviewees' responses and the wider literature in this field. Current concerns appear to be that, whilst practitioners may hypothetically be plugged in to participatory democracy, the current connection is particularly weak and in danger of being switched off. The question is what, if anything, can be done to restore the democratic wiring and strengthen the community connection?

### **Switched on**

All three practitioners are enthusiastic about their work and ready to go, but are hindered by problems of accountability, reporting and focus - especially in relation to funding. Neil finds that there is not enough time to plan spending, nor to spend. Recently, for example, three years of funding had to be spent in a year and a half. In addition, lack of clear guidelines, complex administration procedures and frequent reporting requirements put pressure on to justify spending and ensure resources are used 'appropriately'. This takes up time that would be better spent working with communities. Shortage of time also impacts on relationships with other partners which have to be hurriedly built up from the ground.

During lockdown, Lynn raised money from various Trusts that gave her the freedom to develop new kinds of work unlikely to have been funded by the local authority at the time. She had always found it useful to seek external funding, especially when it enabled groups to travel to meet up and plan to act collectively, but this type of fund-raising took up a lot of time, affecting her role as a worker. Stevie finds that Council bids for funding for various community services can create problematic relationships between Third Sector NGOs and the Council to retain funding. He is constantly having to justify work to secure further funding, and finds that such adjustments can affect relations with and between community groups. For all three practitioners there is a strain on collaborative working because of the competitive culture funding has created.

Their working environment also shines a light on the reality of life in communities. For example, Neil sees his work as creating opportunities for collective learning by putting individuals' personal experience into the wider community context. Sometimes he is able to document work in creative ways that involve group activities through, for example, making a film. Lynn's focus is specifically on empowerment because, rather than doing things for people, she wants to put it back to them: 'what do *you* want to do?'. She uses policy language strategically - for example the focus on 'inclusion' - by deliberately trying to include people normally excluded from policy definitions. Her work is regulated by policy but there are always ambiguities that make room for interpretation and challenge. She has created the space to develop programmes in health and well-being that focus on structural issues such as poverty and poor housing rather than, for example, individual responsibility for eating a healthy diet. She feels that she plays an important role in counteracting low expectations: some people see no hope but, once involved, despair can be converted into action that can be transformative. Stevie feels that his most important role lies in helping various Council departments step up and form the interface for action. For example, the Community Learning Partnership provides a framework that enables them to sustain the work collaboratively. He sees himself as a custodian of community-based learning and development: responsible for keeping it going and holding on to its educational purpose in particular.

All three practitioners are active and committed, but acknowledge that there are many barriers to genuine community participation. One that Stevie identified is the competitive culture which has developed as many NGOs attempt to obtain funding from the same pot of money. This is exacerbated by tight time frames around budgets that mean there is insufficient time to have the depth of discussion necessary to think about, and be able to stand outside of, policy. Lynn, too, is always trying to expand limited ways of understanding problems and/or solutions so that collective action is seen as a natural response. Neil finds opportunities for strategic thinking with colleagues and other organisations that enable them all to think beyond the narrow parameters that policy forces them into.

Speaking up and out is important for all three. For example, what keeps Lynn going is righteous anger caused by seeing the wasted potential of people over several generations. She focuses on demonstrating that community learning and development make an important contribution to communities' health and well-being. In particular, she uses arts and culture to raise issues and build relationships so that people express themselves and become more aware of what they have in common. She also tries to protect space so that communities are not edged out of decision-making. This means that, instead of simply being consulted on pre-determined problems, they are encouraged to raise issues that are important to *them*. She considers that genuine participation involves the realisation that problems are systemic rather than individual or accidental. Similarly, Neil focuses on social and personal change through creating opportunities for collective learning; locating personal experience in its wider societal context. This enables programme participants to gain the confidence to speak up about their rights in various settings. Stevie is concerned that communities are being overwhelmed with responsibility in the context of cuts through, for example, 'community ownership' strategies that could silence their legitimate challenges to the status quo. Instead, he tries to work with people to enact their rights, but this is very demanding, so he tries to find new ideas and energy from fellow practitioners and through his contact with like-minded colleagues involved with *Concept*.

What is clear is that, whilst all three practitioners are switched on and have the experience and skills necessary to help people participate in democratic processes, there are many barriers to overcome before community voices can be clearly heard, never mind taken seriously.

### **Disconnected**

Over time, and largely as a consequence of 'hyper free-market ideology', it has been suggested that the logic of individual choice has now supplanted any serious commitment to collective endeavour; that the conscious 'fracking ... of mental resources' (Taylor, 2026) by big tech in their own interests is greatly reducing the prospects for both community and democratic attention. It's not so much 'divide and rule', as John Lanchester (2026) puts it, as 'divide in order to market'. It is certainly the case that the personal agency we are routinely sold is increasingly individualistic: 'we alone can choose to be more healthy, not to commit crime, .... to flourish, to win at the game of life.' (Pickett, 2026b). Democracy, as we see it, is clearly at risk in this way of thinking. According to the Lowy Institute (2024), certain conditions need to be in place for democracy to diminish. These range from economic inequality and social change to distrust in institutions and political polarisation. There is a distinction to be made between democracy as a matter of procedural equality, through the ballot box, and democracy as an active process which acknowledges those material conditions which exclude people from civic life. At the very least, it could be argued that the traditional wiring of deliberative democracy has become alarmingly disconnected.

Given such profound changes in the democratic imagination, it is perhaps unsurprising that communities are seen to be fracturing, with growing polarisation exacerbated, as Hope not Hate (2026) see it, by the 'narrative relaunching of demographic change by some far right groups which tap into economic pessimism, inequalities and real or perceived grievances'. This presents a profound, perhaps existential, challenge to forms of community education with collective, democratic objectives. William Davies (2020) sums it up well when he argues that we are witnessing a collision between rival ideologies of society: 'Communities look desperately to the state while the state looks hopefully to communities'. By way of example perhaps, during the limited period of this minor piece of research, the title of one

of the projects included has morphed from Community Learning and Development, suggesting education, to Connected Communities, suggesting some form of solidarity, to The Community Wellbeing Service, which hints at self-help. Whilst transactional models of community participation such as those encountered by our interviewees suggest decentralised power, the reality they encounter is of decentralised responsibility. This is another example of how the inclusive language of community can be used to distract from the political reality of depleting resources: 'a stress test of optics rather than a contest of values' (Wanga, 2026).

The moral vacuum created by this kind of artifice can all too easily be filled by those whose interests lie in enflaming discontent, and 'anger and rage have become the dominant political emotions of our time ... [reducing] ... the capacity of citizens to communicate rationally about contentious political issues through dialogue and deliberation' (Fraser, 2025). In addition, as Kate Pickett (2026a) acknowledges, if people are 'thirsty for hope', we shouldn't be surprised if it is temporarily quenched by those offering simplistic solutions. A legitimate sense of powerlessness is a major contributor to local dissatisfactions. If those with least power are not given the opportunity to understand the wider politics of power, they are more likely to blame those around them, who are not like them, egged on by inflammatory actors and the 'supercharged expressionism' of the web (Kidd, 2026). It may be that less righteous indignation against misbehaving individuals and greater acknowledgement of the personal consequences of inequality may be one way of curbing turns towards extremist organisations. There are so many contemporary pressures, particularly on poorer young people, what with social media, the constant need for validation, and malign forces trying to weaponise their vulnerability. A combination of powerlessness and lack of hope for the future can induce the kind of fearless behaviour seen increasingly on our streets. Nothing to lose! Instead of dismissing young people through 'the language of nuisance and control', they should be recognised as 'social subjects, entitled not only to boundaries, but also to space, dignity and a future' (Kung, 2026). The same could be said of communities suffering from years of neglect.

The focus of our interviewees on seeking ways to bring people together is a critical starting point. One example is particularly encouraging. Facilitating the social coming together of a group of local council tenants through the Discover family programme, Lynn and a colleague created the circumstances for the group to identify what was most important to them. Housing and poverty emerged as the main issues both for those who had lived in the area most of their lives, and those who had recently been housed following a stay in temporary accommodation, including asylum seekers. What could easily have become a cause of community division, was turned instead into a source of solidarity as the mutual 'telling of stories' promoted a greater awareness of each other's circumstances. This approach led to a joint publication campaigning for housing improvements for all. This is a perfect illustration of how the slow work of developing communal understanding can alter the human and political dynamic towards 'solidarity rather than obedience.' (Malik, 2026). As Mann (2026) acknowledges: 'we have to live in the space between ... denial and despair', advocating for 'hopeful cynicism'.

## Conclusion

Where are the spaces for democratic practice? These practitioners are, on the whole, 'optimistic but cautious' (the *Big Issue*, 2026) about the possibilities for effective, more responsive, action. One response involves forming alliances with other groups through professional cooperation in order to challenge the market ideal of competition. This, in turn, may enable practitioners to resist dominant discourses and to 'create dialogic, emancipatory spaces which are affirming, positive and culturally sensitive for those participating in them' (Tett & Hamilton, 2019, 253). As a result, they may become more plugged in and less disconnected by working *alongside*, rather than *for*, communities. They also reclaim a sense of agency by challenging excluding discourses and opening up spaces for critical reflection and dialogue in order to spark different ways of thinking (Williams, 1977).

One effective way to resist dominant discourses is to bring different groups together to campaign for the issues they share, such as better housing or youth facilities, and putting everyone's personal experiences into the wider community context. This provides an opportunity for people to tell each

other their stories, promoting a greater awareness of people's circumstances and helping to break down barriers and eliminate the 'them and us' mentality. Once people trust each other, the assumptions that they hold about each other can be challenged and common ground can be found. This process is time-consuming, but in the end, such collective action enables people to reclaim agency, whilst at the same time holding on to 'hopeful cynicism'.

An important aspect of the process of regaining the legitimacy of community education has been the slow work of developing public understanding through both practitioners and communities speaking up and out. This requires an environment where different and sometimes conflicting voices can be heard and respected rather than silenced. It should also be perceived as a stimulating challenge to political parties and their elected representatives. As Sapouna and Gijbels (2016) argue, engaging in free exchanges can be challenging but 'the power of such exchanges lies in the opportunity to make sense of experience and to reconstruct meanings.' These are the points at which community, education and democracy might be reconnected and enabled to influence policy through action in a form that is plugged in and switched on to the views of the population it serves.

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