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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

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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 relaundering 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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Music as a tool for social change: A critical exploration through the lens of Community Education

Kaitlyn Stott

Introduction

Throughout history, music has been used as a powerful tool to aid social change (Reese, 2015). This article will discuss the interconnectedness of music, critical pedagogical practice and community education values, exploring how music functions as a tool for social transformation, collective learning and participatory action.

The choice to use music to grapple with these ideas stems from the opportunity it creates to explore social issues in a creative and widely accessible way. It has been highlighted that music is a universal art form which is engaged with daily by most people (Benjamins et al, 2025). The importance of this is highlighted by international organisations such as UNESCO's Decleration on Cultural Diversity (2021), which states that cultural art, such as music, is an important part of promoting cultural identities.

The use of music in critical community practice is known as 'Community Music', described by Dykema (1969) as 'socialised music' (p.218), meaning that it can have an impact on 'social bonding, cultural transmission, and the expression of social identities' (MacDonald, 2021: 1). Higgins (2024) goes on to discuss Community Music as 'relational practice, vibrating to the tune of the politics of cultural democracy and responding to contemporary and historical forms of cultural and social inequality' (p117). These ideas link to community education practice as it introduces the importance of participatory and inclusive approaches to learning. This aspect of

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practice is important because community practitioners aim to meet both the immediate needs of individuals and communities whilst also working to address systemic challenges.

An early example of music being used in this way comes from the US Civil Rights movement (1954-1968), where music was used to amplify stories, educate, and inspire racial justice, which not only contributed to the empowerment of Black Communities, but forced mainstream Americans to confront racial injustice. This genre was later defined as 'freedom music', with songs such as Bob Dylan's 'Blowin' In The Wind' and 'A Change is Gonna Come' by Sam Cooke providing powerful social commentary of the time, and becoming anthems of protest and change. Freire's idea of 'conscientisation' (1974) is present here. This theory gives name to the process of working alongside people, supporting them to understand their oppression, potentially leading to collective action. Freedom music challenges hegemonic narratives by bringing to light the voices and stories of those facing oppression, with the use of music as a platform for social movements being monumental at this time because it allowed for the Civil Rights Movement to grow, foster resistance and build solidarity.

Looking to a more contemporary context, music has been pivotal in engaging young people who are affected by racial injustice in social and political discourse. For example, Black rapper and activist Stormzy writes songs about racial inequalities he faced growing up (Andrews, 2018), with tracks such as 'Vossi Bop' serving not only as a personal expression of hardship, but a social commentary on systemic issues. Stormzy continues to use music as a tool to bring issues of racial injustice to light in a way that connects with a modern audience, whist acknowledging the struggle many faced throughout time as a result. Brooks (2016) demonstrates this well, stating that 'Black

protest music should sting and burn, be hard to digest for some, leave an aftertaste for others…Black pop radicalism should shake our culture to its core'. Rollock (2020) highlights the importance of this work, noting that 'Stormzy's philanthropy is not charity - it's solidarity'. In its most basic form, using music in this way has created accessible political education, a tool to liberate thinking and promote social change.

Using music as a form of identity expression is also a major element to the punk genre. This subculture is characterised by an anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment stance (Hartley, 2020). This was no more pertinent than during the 1980s in the UK as increased unemployment, distrust between people and the government, and growing unrest within the young working-class community saw Punk take on more anti-authoritarian and anarchist tendencies (Worley, 2017). Artists such as The Sex Pistols were pivotal within the industry at this time, with their music serving as a radical critique of institutionalized Britain. This is highlighted in their song 'God Save The Queen', the lyrics of which take a vitriolic position against the monarchy and nationalism, embodying the chaotic nature of the time (Savage, 1991). Furthermore, their slogan 'No Future' embodies the desolate outlook many had at that time, performing as not only a rebellious ideology but a direct critique of the lack of opportunity and social mobility. Although many believed that followers of the punk movement were intent on being violent and inciting anarchy (Frith and McRobbie, 1990: 57), Marcus (1989) notes that ideas 'did not express a desire for destruction so much as a recognition that the future had already been stolen' (p.8).

A key aspect of Punk ideology is the emphasis on DIY Ethics, defined as creating your own cultural space using whatever resources are available, especially in response to gaps in mainstream culture (Spencer, 2008). This approach has empowered marginalised groups by offering alternative routes for expression (Barker, 2013). It aligns closely with community education values like inclusion and participant-led practices, particularly Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), which focuses on community strengths over deficits (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). By challenging deficit-based thinking through music, participants can reflect on their identities and social contexts. The radical nature of this ties into contemporary community practice, which must remain political to promote social change. As Shor (1992) notes, critical pedagogy seeks to dismantle power structures and foster agency. Music, especially within this genre, becomes a vehicle for voicing injustice and inspiring collective transformation.

However, the idea that music can create real social change is contested. Adorno (1944) argues that music is part of a commodified culture industry, promoting false consciousness rather than critical awareness: 'the culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, p.111). This suggests music may give a sense of involvement without enabling genuine change. Curtis (2021) supports this, noting how the industry fosters individualism, undermining collective action. I contend that neoliberalism plays a key role, promoting new-managerial ideologies that prioritise individual over collective solutions. Harvey (2005) explores this, and it's reflected in how music today often markets personal and social struggles rather than analysing or addressing them. As Giroux (2004) notes, this raises

concerns about whether music can support liberation or simply glamorises struggle within mainstream media.

Although it is true that how an individual engages in cultural activities is autonomous, this can lead to collective transformation as individuals gain a shared understanding. As stated by DeNora (2000), individuals interpret and construct their social reality through music, but 'it is in collective engagement with music that its potential to reshape the social order emerges' (p. 101). This relates to Hegel's (1820) notion that individual agency and freedom is only understood when placed into the context of a wider society. From this, music becomes more than a form of personal expression, but a process used to critically engage and reflect. This idea also moves beyond general critical pedagogical practice, moving into critical heutagogy. Described as the theory of self-directed learning (Hase and Kenton, 2000), this concept is relevant here as it supports the idea that, when individuals engage with music, they are not simply consumers but are actively cultivating knowledge and capacity.

In grassroots community practice, theoretical frameworks help practitioners understand the role of music in critical community work. Kunst (1969) defines ethnomusicology as 'the study of music in its cultural context', and Nettl (2005) expands on this, viewing music as a cultural phenomenon tied to society, other art forms, and the environment (p.3). When applied to critical pedagogy, this means tailoring music practice to specific communities. Feminist ethnomusicology, for example, highlights music as both a gendered and cultural experience (Koskoff, 1987), reinforcing the need for inclusivity and intersectionality in practice. Feld's (1996) concept of 'acoustemology' - blending acoustics and epistemology - further supports this by emphasising listening and storytelling as key cultural and educational practices. This offers practitioners a bridge

into a potentially powerful, creative, inclusive and informal educational practice which chimes with the values of a more radical purpose at the heart of community education.

This idea urges practitioners to consider the 'sonic identities' of communities - formed through shared cultural and environmental experiences (Croce, 2018). Schafer (1977) highlights how modern soundscapes, both literal and metaphorical, reflect societal unrest and division. Understanding the multitude of voices and narratives behind these 'soundscapes' can help practitioners grasp how individuals think and feel, shaped by what they've been 'forced to listen to'. This aligns with Gay's (2000) concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, recognising that personal cultural soundscapes influence how people engage with the world. Practitioners must therefore validate the emotional and cultural realities of participants, especially when shaped by dominant ideologies or societal 'noise'. Music becomes a powerful tool here, offering a non-verbal outlet for expression (Buber, 1970) and, as Bandura (1987) suggests, helping participants build confidence and a sense of agency beyond the musical space.

Music is already widely used by community education practitioners to explore social issues and inspire change on both individual and community levels (Education Scotland, 2012). Bartleet's *Dimensions of Social Outcomes* (2023) offers a useful framework of four dimensions of transformation through music. For individuals , it supports 'personal transformations' (Heard and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, 2024: 2), such as cultural connection and well-being, promoting social integration and dialogue through 'relational transformation' (2024: 2). Combined, these lead to 'community transformations' (*Ibid*: 2) at the meso level, fostering collective identity, belonging, and social cohesion. These layered outcomes show how music can support both reflection and participation, encouraging critical engagement with social issues. This links to

Freire's idea of 'authentic thinking', which occurs through critical collective communication, not isolation (p.77).

This is important because it highlights the potential that music can be both an active and reflective tool in community practice. Regeliski (2009) describes music as 'social pedagogy' as it can hold the power to educate through dialogue, lived experience and social interaction. Furthermore, the use of community education values and principles can ensure that music and other art-based practices are not *passive*.

Clover (2006) highlights that using music can support people to engage in critical dialogue and reflection, leading to transformation. Small (1998) coined the term 'musicking', describing not only the physical act of creating music, but engaging with it in any form (p.9). This idea links well to community education practice and its emphasis on identity, belonging, and participation. However, some argue against its effectiveness. Creech et.al. (2013) argue that there is a lack of long-term data to suggest that positive outcomes have lasting impact on participants after they have participated, highlighting the need for increased long-term studies into community music within critical community practice.

Matarasso (2019) notes that short-term funding cycles and instrumental policy agendas undermine community-led cultural work. The transformative potential of community music is often limited by funding instability, which hinders long-term planning and impact. Government responses vary: Arts Council England has prioritised economic outcomes, which some argue compromises grassroots practice (Belfiore, 2022). Similarly, while the Scottish Government faces these pressures, there is growing recognition of the value of cultural participation (Creative Scotland, 2020). I argue that

Scottish initiatives often reflect a more critical pedagogical approach, particularly through programmes like Sistema Scotland. Inspired by Venezuela's El Sistema model, it engages communities experiencing poverty through long-term, relationship-based orchestral work that promotes collective action and community development. As Borchert (2012) points out, its focus on building resilience and life skills echoes the demands of global capitalism, linking closely with critical community practice.

The following examples of Community Music practice demonstrate the tangible impact of music as a tool for social change.

Musicians Without Borders

Musicians Without Borders (MWB) is a global organisation founded by justice-focused musicians from the Netherlands, working across continents to support those affected by conflict through 'peace building for social change' (MWB, 2025: np). Their *Music Leadership* programme operates in countries like Palestine, Rwanda, El Salvador, and Northern Ireland - regions marked by division and trauma. The programme builds the skills of young people and educators, aiming to empower participants to later train others. Green (2008) highlights the value of such informal, peer-led learning, which encourages cooperation and shared goals (p.14). MWB's work is grounded in key principles, such as non-violence, echoing Cage's (1961) view of music as a tool for peaceful dialogue. The organisation embraces collaboration by co-designing programmes with communities rather than imposing them. However, while MWB claims not to fall within the scope of Community Music, and to work according to local needs, it's important to critically assess the implications of a Western-led organisation working in culturally complex, post-conflict contexts (Triandis, 2000).

Dovetail Orchestra

In a national context, the Dovetail Orchestra in Bristol engages refugees and asylum seekers in collaborative music-making, aiming to build connections, support musical learning, and provide a welcoming space (Dovetail Orchestra, 2025). The project encourages cultural fusion and empowers participants, with research, noting positive impacts on members' wellbeing (ARC West, 2025). Unlike critical pedagogy, the organisation leans towards an andragogical approach, focusing on adult, self-directed learning shaped by participants' lived experiences and cultural values. As Knowles (1980) highlights, adults need to understand the purpose of learning and take responsibility for it (p.43). While the orchestra supports wellbeing on a micro-level, it does not address the broader systemic issues faced by participants, such as legal status and access to services. This raises concerns about 'instrumentalisation', where community arts are used more as engagement tools than valued for their intrinsic worth (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). Similarly, Garnham (2005) warns against reducing culture to a function of social policy (p.27). From a critical lens, Dovetail's impact could be deepened by integrating collective action and focusing more explicitly on challenging marginalisation, as Mayo (1999) advocates for radical adult education grounded in lived experience and aimed at social change (p.95).

Vox Liminis

In Scotland, Vox Liminis is an incredibly poignant example of critical pedagogical practice that highlights the effect that music has on emotion and wellbeing. The organisation works to explore 'the role that the arts can play in shaping a more just society' (Vox Liminis, np). This idea is well documented by theorists. For example,

Habermas (1987) discusses the concept of 'lifeworld', 'made up of a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns' (p.124), where meaning is created through the lived experiences of individuals. The organisation works in this realm by restorative justice and arts-based practice to challenge dominant narratives around crime and criminal justice, allowing people to tell their story through creative means. One of their projects, 'Distant Voices', explores crime, punishment and reintegration, using song-writing as a creative expression of these processes and struggles. By pairing Scottish song-writers with participants, the project has facilitated the creation of many songs and albums that highlight and humanise the complexities of life before, during and after punishment. Furthermore, the programme works to resist the narrow, target driven frameworks that are often used within criminal justice interventions. Lowe (2020) critiques these for prioritising measurable outcomes over actively listening and engaging in dialogical approaches. In contrast 'Distant Voices' remains grounded in co-production and lived experience, utilising music as a tool that participants can use to reflect their own stories, values and experiences of the system. This echoes Freire's (1970) idea of prescriptive approaches to education, in which 'the educator's role is to regulate the way the world "enters into" the students' (p. 76). Instead, the oraganisation utilises dialogical, emancipatory practice, grounded in critical community practice.

A clear connection among these projects is the work they do to raise cultural capital. Bourdieu (1997) discusses the notion of cultural capital as the level of knowledge, life experiences and skill a person has in relation to the dominant culture. However, the projects in question look to push beyond the acceptance of presiding ideology, engaging participants in practice that allows them to reframe knowledge. Hall (1990) discusses

culture as the site of struggle in this context and highlights how using music as a tool for cultural expression allows marginalised groups and individuals to foster and reclaim cultural identity. However, there are some counterarguments to its success. Whilst music can be used as a tool for inclusion, it can also be used to exclude individuals and communities. When music, or the ability to participate in arts-based practice, sits within the dominant culture, it can alienate those who cannot, or struggle to, participate due to social, cultural, and economic barriers (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Kemmis (2006) adds that even well-intentioned practitioners may inadvertently reinforce inequalities if cultural justice is overlooked.

However, if handled sensitively (and critically), this disconnect can be viewed as a strength respectively. As noted by Dewey (1938), reflection must be used as a bridge to connect understanding of issues and the action taken to challenge them. Music is both a deeply personal and universal experience and offers a powerful tool for this reflection (p.256). When used in critical community practice, music becomes more than a passive creative outlet; it transforms into a tool that can support dialogical approaches and support progressive social change.

In conclusion, music as a tool for social change strongly aligns with the values of community education. Playing, listening to, and interpreting music can help individuals and communities explore identity, build relationships, and engage with social issues. As List (1979) notes, music can be used to address non-musical problems (p.2), showing its broader social value. However, for community music to remain meaningful, it must be rooted in critical and pedagogical practice to avoid tokenism. Practitioners should continue to use participatory methods to spark dialogue, encourage reflection, and deepen understanding of social issues. Drawing on broader pedagogical approaches

can also help keep practice relevant and critical. As Phelan (2023) states, music-making can inspire civic imagination and support more sustainable social connections, reinforcing its role as a powerful tool for transformation in critical community practice.

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Constructing The Citizen (or What They Don't Tell You About Strategy Work)

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Preface: Researcher Positionality and Organisational Setting

This paper is drawn from my 2025 Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA), a professional doctorate oriented to workplace problems and contribution to professional practice. Although I had left the City Council where I had been employed before I began my research, I treated my subjectivity as an 'at home' ethnographer (Alvesson, 2009). This reflected my knowledge of the organisation and pre-existing relationships.

I used the organisational setting to explore the discourses in city strategy work and how they constructed citizen subjectivities. Although the research was not therefore a conventional 'case study', nor was it concerned with organisational or individual 'rights or wrongs', there was a higher than average level of sensitivity due to an ongoing organisational review. I therefore agreed to anonymise the city. As cities are themselves discourses, choosing not to reveal the city's identity helped achieve focus and avoid unecessary distraction.

My empirical material comprised strategy-related documents from the city in question and texts from interviews with senior managers which I analysed using discourse analytical tools and techniques. The methods take as read that the researcher's assumptions and expectations are entangled with the analysis.

Definitions:

Citizen

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My use of the term 'citizen' is the socially desirable version, indicating active engagement and contribution to society. This is in contrast to a legalistic or administrative category denoting membership of a political community.

Discourse

There is no one definition of discourse but this is the one I most often use because of its explicit link to action:

'Discourse' is defined here as an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 175).

City Strategy

I treat city strategy as a discourse, a social practice and in Foucauldian terms, a 'technology' of governing, aimed at shaping and moulding human beings. It is a social scientific and philosophical perspective rather than one grounded in conventional industry or economics agendas.

Neoliberalism

My approach to neoliberalism is as a government 'rationality' rather than a political programme; it denotes a paradoxical mechanism that emphasises freedom of choice, while simultaneously regulating and surveilling that freedom (Dean, 2010).

New Public Management (NPM)

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An academic label for a collection of doctrines that came to dominate the bureaucratic reform agenda from the 1980s. Characteristics usually include the importation of business practices and language into the public sector and encouragement of quasi-markets to create competition (Hood, 1991).

Subjectivity

Identity can be seen as something 'inherent' in the individual, while a subjectivity is socially constructed from the constitutive force of discourses which offer 'choices' of subject positions or 'places' for 'speaking subjects'.

Introduction

After many years working as a local government manager, I switched track, becoming a mature student studying my own practice of city strategy-making. I began to view my seemingly rational and objective government work from different vantage points and to ponder its effects. One of the more unsettling findings was the realisation that my colleagues and I had been engaged in an unwitting process of producing different 'versions' of the citizen. By positioning citizens, it seemed that my work practice had also been shaping versions of myself and my practitioner peers. New questions arose; for example, when I produced a report that categorised citizens as 'disadvantaged' or 'deprived', or characterised them as 'productive', what did that do to them, and what did it do to me?

In this article, I draw from my doctoral research which uses Foucault's governmentality and discourse theories to explore processes of citizen subjectification. The article is

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structured as follows. In Part 1, I provide a contextual outline, summarising the theories which did most to challenge my settled ways of understanding the world. Part 2 sets out a typology of citizen subject positions drawn from the discourses I identified, based on material collected and analysed from city strategy work. In Part 3, I discuss why this is important and the implications for government practitioners, particularly those with the responsibility - or perhaps the misfortune - of writing strategies.

Part 1: Setting the Context

Discourse and 'Making Up People'

I was introduced to the work of the French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault in an evening class many years ago and was sufficiently intrigued to re-visit it many years later. His 1970s lectures on discourse, governmentality, and subjectivity provided a very different way of understanding my work as a city strategist.

While Foucault's (1972) exploration of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is not for the faint-hearted, discourse, at least on one level, is surprisingly straightforward. This is because we are all 'doing discourse' at almost every given moment in how we make sense of events, people and 'things'. If we hold on to the idea that a discourse will always 'ring true' at a particular place and time, it can be conceptualised as *recognition*. Where people are concerned, we have to "talk the talk and walk the walk" to be recognised as a particular *kind of person* (Hacking, 2004; Gee, 2011, p. 177). In Foucault's theory, it is discourse that provides the invisible rules that tell us how to do the talking and walking, indeed how to *be* that person. The complexity arises when we acknowledge that subjectivities are multiple and in constant flux.

While the concept of identity is in common use, I prefer subject position or subjectivity (used interchangeably here) because identity seems to imply fixity as well as a very un-Foucauldian orientation towards psychology. Subject positioning is useful in creating a visualisation of how discourses offer a 'space' which individuals (or subjects), may 'choose', not necessarily consciously, to occupy. Once occupied, people are likely to view the world from that vantage point, adopting the relevant "conceptual repertoire" of "images, metaphors, story lines and concepts" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46). The implied choice in taking up a subject position illustrates the point that subjectification processes are not automatic and positionings are always provisional and may be resisted (Ball, 2016).

With its capacity to construct different versions of events and people, discourse is therefore very powerful as a mechanism for explaining everything from grand movements of social change to everyday, even mundane, activities such as the strategy work I am looking at here. The important point is to understand discourse as a force which *produces* something else. In other words, discourses have *effects*, facilitated or enabled through the way in which they convey meaning. It follows that strategy work is treated here not in terms of what it *is*, but what it *does*. And the doing part is the work of making up *kinds of people*.

Classifying Citizens

It is obvious, yet nowadays unremarked, that systems of categorisation and classification make government work possible: for example, statistics such as 'unemployed' or 'unskilled'; or economic categories such as 'consumers', the metaphorical *avalanche* of numbers (Hacking, 2016). It was the government practices through which such classifications were created and sustained that so fascinated the

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theorists who developed Foucault's outline of what he called 'governmentality' (Miller & Rose, 2008). For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to keep in mind the implied distinction between 'government' and 'mentality'. When government practitioners categorise citizens, the question concerns the discourses that govern such work.

Strategy work provides one of many government regimes of practice through which citizens can be made more productive, resilient, active, and responsible. And most importantly, how citizens can be rendered *governable*. Though government practitioners may not think of their work in this way, what they do through economic strategy work anticipates and makes possible different ways for citizens to understand themselves. In doing so, practitioners unavoidably create subject positions for themselves (McKinlay & Pezet, 2017). Although I will not be dealing with the latter in this article, it will be useful to bear this in mind when looking at the citizen typology.

Part 2: A Typology of Citizens

There is a substantial body of literature on citizenship that tussles with concepts of duty and obligation, and their interface with rights and freedom. Of special interest here is the research on subjectification in public sector settings (Lister, 2015; Wright, 2016). Following Foucault, I have taken a more explicit governmentality framework than these literatures and approach the construction of the citizen from two perspectives: as a *process*, where the construction can be understood as an ongoing practice of government and as an *effect* where citizen subjectivities are treated as an *outcome* of governing. I will concentrate on the second, taking a look at one possible version of a simple typology.

The Discourses

I identified the following discourses (Figure 1) which were the basis for the typology (Figure 2): **Market** discourse denoting an orientation to competition, entrepreneurialism and transactional relations; **New Public Management (NPM)** discourse particularly associated with targets, monitoring and efficiency (see Definitions); **Bureaucratic** discourse, concerned with order, prudentialism and rule-bound ways of working; and **Humanistic** discourse, a broad category encompassing moralistic discourses such inclusion, and citizenship discourses which, as noted earlier constitute a range of overlapping categories. These discourses are not the only ones in strategy work and they may be merged and sub-divided almost without limit. But for our purposes here, they are sufficient to illustrate the typology which I interpret below.

Figure 1: Discourses in City Strategy Work

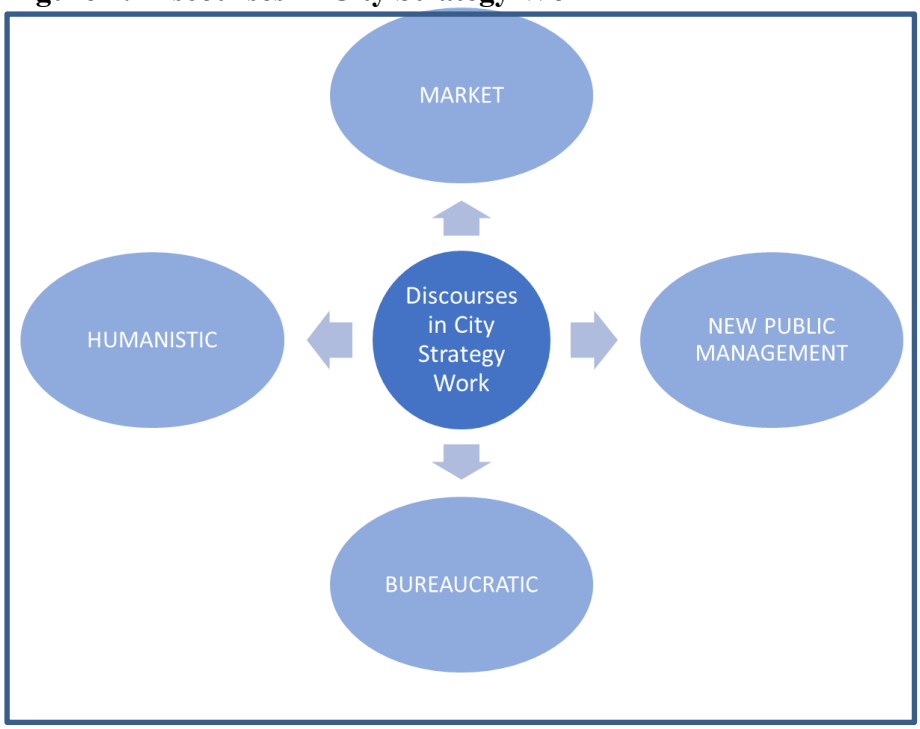
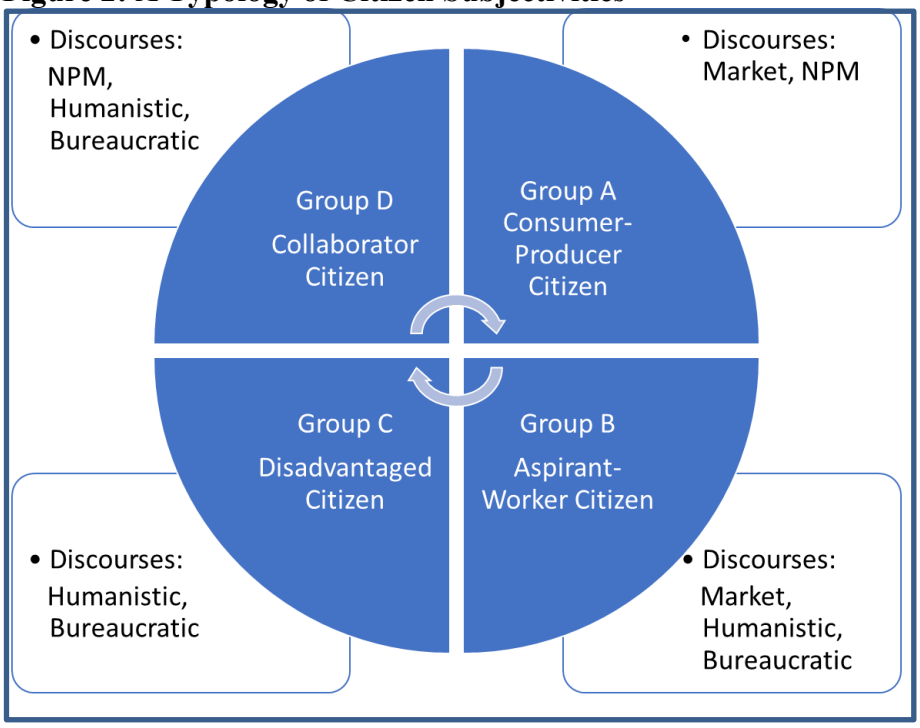


Figure 2: A Typology of Citizen Subjectivities



Interpretation of the Citizen Typology

I begin with **Group A**, the Consumer-Producer Citizen. It is a desirable and conventional subjectivity, not typically targeted in strategies, a passive beneficiary of 'the economy'; stable; orderly and governable. The group comprises: workers in work 'that pays'; workers 'progressing' in work, for example, through personal development or promotion; and citizens defined in government statistics as both the *economically active*, and *inactive*, the latter referring to the sub-population who, for various reasons, do not need paid work. The consumer-producer consumes and produces for their own satisfaction and contributes to calculations of the productive workforce. It is the rest of the population who are considered to need the attention of government.

The other three groupings B, C and D therefore comprise the main targets of strategy. For the purposes of this model, these are, respectively B, the Aspirant-Worker Citizen; C, the Disadvantaged Citizen; and D, the Collaborator Citizen.

Group B The Aspirant-Worker Citizen is a grouping in work or with aspirations to work. It is the most widespread subjectivity in strategy work for the economy and a key target for government programmes with the tacit objective to address the risk of such groups falling into Group C. This is the archetypal 'active economic subject', a prevalent subjectivity featuring in critical scholarship on neoliberalism and the worker (Fejes, 2010). The grouping encompasses employees, business owners, and aspiring workers wishing to become employ-able. They are skill-seekers and opportunity-seekers, judged to require specialised improvement programmes to help them enhance their skills and knowledge, develop or take up new 'opportunities', advance their careers and maximise their productivity and value to the economy.

It is argued that the pursuit of such opportunities creates a sense of freedom, excitement and the potential for human fulfilment (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2005). With the prospect of such rewards, there is therefore an assumption of willingness to take up the subject position offered, particularly as the rewards of becoming employable and employed may extend beyond the economic, activating humanistic discourse. Nevertheless, the possibility of resistance to taking up the subject position is always open to citizens, who may ignore 'opportunities', opt not to engage in training programmes, or engage reluctantly or even defiantly in learning activities.

Group C The Disadvantaged Citizen represents the second main dimension for government programmatic activity. This group of citizens tends to be subjected to formal statistical classifications such as unemployed, homeless, low-income, living in

poverty and similar. It is a target 'at risk' group, judged to be excluded in some sense from the economy and a focus of activity to reduce the potential for disorder.

Even more so than in Group B, making this group employable is of critical importance; this includes activities ranging from basic life skills to gaining, remaining, and progressing in work. Such programmes are moralistic and even utopian in their aims and practice. Outside economic development strategies, the group are targeted for a wide range of other therapeutic, educational and support programmes.

While there is a general assumption that citizens will willingly take up the subject position offered, there is also evidence of resistance. Citizens may resist being labelled 'deprived' and may take up other subject positions associated with individual acts of resistance, activating discourses of risk and disorder, for example, illegal behaviours, or collectively organised campaigning or protest (Lister, 2015).

Group D The Collaborator Citizen, is targeted directly or indirectly for participation in government. Collaboration as a policy goal has become extraordinarily common as a desirable way of working, so unremarkable that its meaning is rarely elaborated. Yet, a discourse perspective must always involve subjecting taken-for-granted concepts to scrutiny.

Depending on the discourses mobilised, collaboration may be recognised as instrumentalist or emancipatory (Haddara & Lingard, 2013). I found it to be most often represented as an instrumentalist approach to 'delivery', a solution to inefficiency and duplication of effort that mobilises NPM discourse. The alternative would be to value collaboration for itself, mobilising humanistic or emancipatory

discourse types such as inclusion or democracy. These contrasting discourses can be mapped to different Collaborator Citizen subject positions.

While space does not permit a full exploration of the possibilities here, I suggest that the collaborator citizen may be seen as an idealised subjectivity associated with the maintenance of social order. Collaborative processes in government tend to operate through consensus-building techniques, activating bureaucratic and NPM discourses. Such consensualising practices, in depoliticising difference, may have the effect of subjectifying the citizen passively rather than actively.

Part 3: Implications and Learning

Why Does Subjectivity Matter?

It has been argued that subjectivity is "a key site of political struggle" (Ball, 2016, p. 1129). The struggle in this case takes place through the discourses in strategy work that enable or constrain the subject positions made available to citizens. Once a subject position is taken up, citizens 'subject' themselves to the rules and conventions of that subject position and the positions may appear normal or 'natural'. Yet these naturalisation processes may work to constrain the freedom of citizens by limiting the subject positions offered. City strategy work, as a manifestation of discourses, has the power to shape subjectivities deemed 'governable' through the promotion, however unconscious, of desirable citizen behaviours.[1]

The subject positions offered in the typology are characterised by a sense of what feels natural to practitioners working on government economic development strategy: consuming; getting into work or training; gaining skills; participating in collaborative exercises curated by government. It feels natural to me. But such natural-ness is a signal

[1] Footnote: A parallel theory is found in the "looping effect" of classifications.which may have the effect of changing the behaviour of the people so classified; people then no longer fit the classification, resulting in a further round of classifications and subjectification effects (Hacking, 2004, p. 279). There are also affinities with stereotypes which I will not discuss here.

that discourses are at work, providing those invisible rules that guide practitioners to categorise or 'cluster' citizens in certain ways and not others. When discourses become fully naturalised, they can become so dominant or hegemonic that it becomes difficult to think in any other way.

Learning and Lessons for Practitioners

Foucauldian discourse analysis rarely lends itself to 'bullet point' actions, but can have impact in challenging practitioners to think more critically about their own practice (Sharp & Richardson, 2001). The task is therefore one of developing a more critical, self-reflective way of working. As I suggested in the introduction, practitioners could consider how they employ language in classifying citizens, pondering the assumptions bound up in making classifications, and what this does to the classified people and to themselves. There is also scope to consider the conventional language of strategy, examining possibilities for adaptation of common terminology, images and cultural stereotypes. Practitioners could also question taken-for-granted concepts, such as *collaboration* as discussed earlier.

Problem representation toolkits such as that developed by Bacchi (2012) provide a method of examining the solutions to problems as a way of revealing the underpinning assumptions and implications for subjectivity. For example, if 'employability'is the solution, then what kind of problem representations can be identified and what *kinds of people* are being imagined?

Classifications could potentially be diversified to produce a more nuanced range of 'communities', activating a greater variety of discourse types. Later in my research, I found that there was the potential for new subjectivities within citizenship, manifesting

in discourses of community, belonging and solidarity. But that is a topic for another paper.

For the moment, we must remember that subjectification processes are not deterministic, and resistance is always available to the subject. It has been remarked that 'while governmental practices might seek to create specific kinds of subjects, it does not mean that they necessarily or completely succeed in doing so' (Inda, 2005, p.10). Subjectivity does indeed appear to be a site of ongoing struggle, even if the site of battle and terms of engagement remain undeclared and opaque.

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The Edges of Belonging: Youth Work, Participation, and Everyday Resistance in the Gaps of Policy

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Abstract

This article explores youth work as a form of everyday resistance and relational care that emerges in the cracks of policy and provision. Drawing on practice-based experience in a grassroots youth project in Glasgow and doctoral research using photovoice methods, it considers how young people experiencing structural violence through poverty, criminalisation, housing precarity, and exclusion co-create alternative forms of support and belonging outside formal systems. These young people are often described as 'hard to reach', yet their daily acts of resilience, refusal, and mutual care reveal complex survival strategies and political agency. This article argues that informal, care-based youth work does not simply supplement statutory services but actively contests dominant discourses of resilience, participation, and wellbeing. Through a first-person, reflective narrative, I explore how small acts form a radical practice of care rooted in solidarity, not service logic. This survival work frequently falls outside official outcome frameworks but is essential to the relational trust that underpins meaningful youth work. I critique tokenistic models of youth participation and argue for reframing wellbeing as collective, structural, and co-produced. In doing so, the article contributes to theorisations of radical youth work, affective labour, and ethics of care. It calls for greater recognition of the moral tensions and emotional demands of practice in

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austerity contexts, and more honest engagement with the political nature of care. It ends by asking: What does it mean to practice belonging in a world that so often denies it?

Keywords: Youth work; Participation; Belonging; Structural violence; Care ethics; Everyday resistance

Introduction

Over the past several years, my work as a youth worker and researcher has been rooted in relationships, especially with young people living through structural violence. This includes those navigating the care system, insecure housing, criminalisation, poverty, and mental health struggles — often all at once. Their daily realities reveal material deprivation and exclusion from systems of care, recognition, and belonging. This article reflects on youth work as a form of resistance and relational care that emerges in the cracks of policy. Drawing on frontline experience in a grassroots youth project in Glasgow and doctoral research using photovoice methods, I explore how young people articulate wellbeing and participate in creating alternative forms of support. Across these contexts, I argue that informal, care-based youth work does not merely supplement statutory provision but challenges the narrow terms of participation and offers a radical model of social justice in practice. I write in the first person deliberately, to reflect the relational nature of this work and to situate myself within the practice, not apart from it.

In the Cracks of the System: Survival Work as Care

The youth project I work with consistently shows up for young people who have been let down time and again by the very systems meant to support them. This includes those navigating housing precarity, school exclusions, contact with the justice system, and constant negotiations with bureaucracy and surveillance. The real work rarely aligns with formal outputs. It looks like helping someone reapply for a bus pass after a school exclusion; sitting with a young person during a housing tribunal; quietly translating housing letters; chasing a social worker who has not returned calls; stretching a youth work budget to pay for groceries, phone data, or a train ticket to court. None of these acts feature in our outcome frameworks but are central to the relationships we build and the trust we sustain. Phoenix and Kelly (2013) describe this as invisible care work. It is the kind of care that emerges not from entitlement or entitlement-based policy but from a relational ethic of showing up. Though it is not formally recognised or remunerated, it is the bedrock of our practice. This form of practice sits uncomfortably within dominant policy discourses that increasingly valorise standardisation, measurable impact, and professionalisation in youth services (Ord, 2016). Care is often seen as soft, informal, or peripheral within these frameworks. However, as Smith (2002) reminds us, informal education and care are not merely add-ons but are essential to creating contexts of meaning, belonging, and learning.

Our project is not a crisis service. We are not a food bank or housing charity. However, in the absence of these, we became a kind of ecosystem of care that tries, as best it can, to hold young people when more formal structures leave them exposed.

This echoes Banks et al. (2019), who argue that ethical youth work frequently involves navigating tension between institutional mandates and everyday moral commitments. In our case, that means operating in the cracks, where needs are urgent but fall outside statutory thresholds. This is what Cooper (2011) calls radical youth work. It is a practice grounded in solidarity rather than service provision, and a commitment to meeting young people where they are, even when that lies outside what is institutionally legible. Radical youth work rejects the logic of resilience as individualised adjustment and instead insists on the right to care, support, and justice, especially for those rendered surplus by mainstream systems.

In this context, safety cannot be reduced to safeguarding protocols or risk assessments. It is not the absence of danger but the presence of dignity. It is someone noticing that you did not show up. It is having your reality recognised and responded to, not dismissed or deferred. In this way, safety became a political and relational practice, not simply a procedural one. hooks (1994) describes, in her work on engaged pedagogy, how care becomes a radical act when it creates spaces of recognition, affirmation, and possibility. This survival work is not an anomaly. It is happening in youth work projects across the UK and beyond. It sustains young people when formal institutions become impersonal, extractive, or harmful. Moreover, as austerity shrinks the welfare state, youth workers and community practitioners are increasingly

expected to absorb the fallout (Arrieta, 2022). This form of practice is both vital and unsustainable without structural change.

Who Does the Work of Belonging?

Too often, the emotional labour of survival is offloaded onto the most marginalised; those with the least institutional power and visibility. In youth work spaces, this includes not only practitioners but young people themselves. They are expected to be resilient, to self-regulate in the face of chronic adversity, and to engage with systems that routinely fail to meet even their most basic needs. While policy frameworks increasingly use the language of early intervention, resilience, or participation, these terms can obscure the structural violence young people navigate daily (Brown, 2015; Goldson et al., 2020; Muncie, 2009). For many young people, particularly those who are racialised, disabled, queer, undocumented, or care-experienced, belonging is conditional. As Ahmed (2012) argues, inclusion is often extended only on the condition of conformity; you can belong, but only if you behave, comply, or do not challenge the terms of inclusion. Youth participation, then, becomes a performance. Those who ask difficult questions, resist being instrumentalised, or speak from places of anger or grief are often pathologised or excluded altogether (Mutsaers, 2023; Thomas, 2007).

The young people I work with recognise this dynamic acutely. They are not 'hard to reach.' They are paying attention. They know when they are being surveyed rather than supported, observed, or included. One young person told me bluntly, 'They only want us to speak when they already know the answer.' Another confided, 'I'm tired of filling in forms that don't change anything.' Their words stay with me. They reveal the deep exhaustion that comes with being continually asked to prove one's worth, not just

for services, but for recognition. Macleod and Emejulu (2014) describe this as the burden of hope placed on marginalised communities: the expectation that, even amidst systemic exclusion, people must continue participating in the structures that exclude them. It was these insights that shaped the direction of my doctoral research. I was not interested in extracting more testimony from young people for systems that were not prepared to change. Instead, I wanted to co-create a space where they could speak on their own terms. I turned to participatory visual methods; specifically, photovoice, as a way of shifting both the content and the form of dialogue (Luttrell, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). Through this process, young people used photography and dialogue to explore what wellbeing meant in their everyday lives. Their images were complex, textured, and politically charged. One young person photographed a broken window and said, 'This is what my mental health feels like.' Another captured a dark stairwell and explained that this was where they went to be alone when everything felt too loud. Others shared images of takeaway chips, football pitches, empty bedrooms, memorial sites, quiet parks, and youth clubs. A landscape of grief and joy emerged, precarity and care, survival and resistance.

Their accounts powerfully challenged clinical, deficit-based, or individualised models of wellbeing. For these young people, wellbeing was not about being fine or fixed. It was not something they could access through referrals or interventions. It was relational. It was embodied. It was about being seen, being held, and being recognised. It meant having somewhere to go, and someone who noticed when you did not arrive. It meant not having to explain their absence before they were welcomed back. This echoes what Arendt (2018) called the human condition: the need for plurality, action, and recognition. In this context, wellbeing was not merely personal; it was political. It

emerged through relationships, community, and the refusal to be reduced to pathology. As a researcher and practitioner, these insights continue to challenge and guide me. They remind me that youth participation cannot be reduced to consultation or compliance. It must involve asking whose terms are being set, who benefits from the framing, and who bears the cost when care is contingent on performance.

Everyday Resistance as Collective Action

In one photovoice project, a group of young people co-designed and led a participatory budgeting process to reimagine mental health support in their community. They were not interested in new diagnoses or therapeutic interventions. Instead, they asked for comfort, connection, and joy: warmth in the youth space, shared meals, music nights, art supplies, and time together without surveillance. What they created was not a service. It was not framed as trauma recovery or youth justice prevention. It was a self-determined space of collective care. It was, in every sense, a community. This profoundly shifted my understanding of what counts as collective action. In popular discourse, collective action is often imagined as public protest, legislative change, or formal organising. However, the young people I work with taught me that resistance is also quiet and relational. It happens in kitchens, WhatsApp groups, drop-in sessions, stairwells, and spontaneous acts of generosity. It is someone noticing you are missing and saving you a plate, someone passing you a coat, someone checking in without making a fuss.

In a context where many young people are excluded from public services or actively harmed by them, these acts are not incidental. They are survival strategies, refusal, and resistance. As hooks (1984) reminds us, care is not passive. When practised by those denied care, it becomes a form of political defiance. Similarly, Tronto (1993) positions

care not as a private or apolitical domain, but as a set of practices that can challenge hierarchies and restructure power. These moments of care challenged me to reframe what counts as political. They were not mediated through official channels, nor did they always seek recognition. However, they held people together when systems did not. They functioned as what Cindi Katz (2004) calls counter-topographies, networks of solidarity that emerge in response to global and local conditions of abandonment and precarity. These practices do not mirror the system, but subvert it by concentrating on human dignity, where none has been offered.

Freire (2000) reminds us that the first act of liberation is naming the world. The young people in this project did just that. Through their images, stories, and decisions about budget priorities, they named what mattered, not what others prescribed. They challenged the idea that wellbeing could be externally defined or bureaucratically allocated. Instead, they articulated care in their own terms and made that care visible and actionable. In doing so, they shifted the terrain of participation from consultation to co-creation. These forms of everyday resistance are rarely celebrated in policy reports. They are not easily measured or commodified. However, they are transformative. As Audre Lorde (1988) wrote, 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' For young people pushed to the edges of belonging, collective care becomes both a sanctuary and a struggle. It is a way of holding each other when institutions cannot or will not. This form of collective action complicates dominant narratives of youth empowerment, which frame change as individual and linear. Instead, I witnessed interdependence; a web of mutual support, accountability, and belonging. It was not about resilience as bounce-back ability, but relational scaffolding and holding one another up when the world felt heavy. The young

people I work with are not waiting for systems to validate them. They are already creating micro-worlds of safety,

creativity, and joy, and those worlds matter.

Participation as Performance or Practice?

We are living in a time when youth participation is evident. Policy frameworks, strategic plans, and funding streams are increasingly peppered with terms like co-production, lived experience, and youth voice. On the surface, this signals progress and a recognition that young people should have a role in shaping the services and systems that affect them. However, beneath this surface lies a troubling reality as, for many young people, participation still feels hollow, tokenistic, or extractive (Kennelly, 2011). As Lundy (2007) argues, participation involves more than being

given a platform to speak. It requires space, support, audience, and influence, each of which must be meaningfully embedded in the process. Without these components, youth voice risks becoming what Tisdall (2016) calls decorative democracy, a display of inclusion without the mechanisms for shared power.

In practice, I have seen this dynamic unfold in numerous settings. Young people are asked to consult on frameworks that have already been finalised. Youth advisory boards are convened without clarity, training, or remuneration. Requests for feedback come with short deadlines, jargon-laden documents, or decisions already made. In these cases, participation becomes aesthetic; a performance rather than a commitment to be honoured. This is the tension I carry. I have seen how easily voice becomes symbolic capital for organisations and is used to bolster legitimacy while leaving decision-making structures untouched. I have also seen the emotional toll this takes on young

people who are repeatedly asked to share their stories without tangible impact. So, I continue to ask the questions:

- How do we honour young people's knowledge without extracting it?
- How do we ensure participation leads to transformation, not just consultation?
- How do we resist the idea that being heard must be earned?

True participation is slow, messy, and often uncomfortable. It demands that adults relinquish control, that institutions sit with complexity, and that relationships are prioritised over outputs. As Gormally and Coburn (2014) suggest, meaningful youth work happens in nexus spaces, where research, practice, and lived experience intersect dialogically, rather than being absorbed into pre-existing agendas. In this sense, participation cannot be about inviting young people to fit into broken systems. It must involve collectively reimagining those systems, questioning what is on the table, who gets to set it, and what it means to be at the centre rather than on the margins.

Conclusion: Belonging as a Political Practice

Dominant models of youth wellbeing are frequently tethered to individualised indicators: emotional regulation, school attendance, self-esteem scores, or mental health service engagement. These metrics often reflect a deficit-based logic, locating wellbeing within the body or behaviour of the young person, rather than in the social, material, and political conditions that shape their lives (Brown, 2015; Wyness, 2015). However, the young people I work with offer a different framework altogether. Wellbeing, for them, is not internal or abstract; it is social, material, and relational. It means having heat in the youth space, food in the fridge, and someone who cares if you make it home. It is the ability to be seen without explanation. To be included without

condition. These everyday needs are often rendered informal or out of scope in policy and funding contexts. However, they are foundational. When care is excluded from formal priorities, it is taken up by underpaid frontline workers or falls through the cracks entirely. This reflects affective injustice, the systemic devaluation of emotional and relational labour (Crean, 2018). Worse still, the burden of wellbeing is increasingly placed on young people. They are told to practice self-care, build resilience, or reach out if they struggle, even as the infrastructures that make care possible are stripped away. In this context, resilience becomes less about thriving and more about enduring neglect (Joseph, 2013). Youth workers are often left holding this contradiction, expected to foster hope, stability, and participation in environments shaped by austerity, racism, and exclusion. They do so while navigating insecure contracts, limited resources, and growing emotional demands. As de St Croix (2016) argues, contingent care sustains communities but extracts heavily from those who provide it. It is both vital and unsustainable.

To move forward, we must reframe wellbeing as a collective, structural concern, not an individual trait to be measured, corrected, or optimised. That means valuing the spaces that offer warmth and trust, funding the activities that centre joy, and respecting the workers who stretch beyond their roles because young people need more than what the system is set up to give. Above all, it means listening when young people tell us what wellbeing looks like in their real lives and believing them. Building safe(r) lives rarely fits within institutional boundaries. However, it happens daily in youth clubs, stairwells, WhatsApp chats, and kitchens. It happens when young people advocate for each other and when workers show up long after their hours end. This is not peripheral to justice. It is justice. For those of us moving between practice, research, and policy, the task is

clear: not just to include marginalised voices, but to centre them. Not just to celebrate participation, but to resource it. Not just to listen, but to be changed by what we hear. I carry with me the lessons taught by young people and workers alike: that belonging is not granted, it is built. That participation without power is performance. Moreover, that youth work, at its most radical, is not about helping young people fit into broken systems but about imagining and building something better, together.

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Dundee: The city that shaped a profession, that shaped a city

Charlie McConnell

Presentation for 50th anniversary of Alexander Conference, May 2025

Introduction

In 2014 the city of Dundee in Scotland became the only city in the UK to be awarded the accolade of UNESCO City of Design. One of the major U.N. agencies, UNESCO's mission is to contribute to the building of a culture of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information. UNESCO played a central role in shaping the UN's policies, supporting community development from its foundation in the 1950s. When making the aware, The UNESCO panel highlighted, in particular, Dundee's approach to engaging local communities in its urban design and redevelopment. Community learning and development managers and fieldworkers played a central role, over four decades, in realising the engagement of local people in their city's regeneration.

In this paper, I want to make the case that Dundee, in particular the local authorities and the higher education professional training institute, played a pioneering role in the making of the community learning and development profession in Scotland. This is not to doubt that many others from across the country contributed significantly[i]. But, as I believe I can demonstrate, it was players in Dundee who shaped this profession in Scotland, second to none. And, further, that the profession had a major role in shaping the city we know today.

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Dundee in the 1970s

In 2019, the city of Dundee in Scotland hosted the World Community Development Conference. In the publicity for the WCDC it highlighted the city's long history of radical social action and workers' education going back to when it was the centre of the jute milling trade in Scotland. It was a city with a tradition of informal gatherings of self-educated, well-read and politically active working people. These groups encouraged working class writing at a time when poorer people had no opportunities to write let alone publish their stories.

One, Mary Brooksbank, who had worked in the Jute mills wrote these now famous lines:

O dear me, the world's ill divided,

Them that works the hardest are the least provided

Dundee in the early 1970s was a depressed post-industrial and ill-divided city. Its textile, shipbuilding and related industries had all but closed. Unemployment and wider indices of poverty and deprivation were amongst the highest in Scotland. And they were to rise higher still during the Thatcher years. Despite the creation by Labour of the post-war welfare state and huge improvements in people's life chances, there remained high levels of wealth and income inequality across the city, and clearly delineated poorer working class tenement neighbourhoods in the inner city and peripheral council housing schemes.

The levels of educational disadvantage within the city had led to the Labour government designating it an Education Priority Area (EPA). And in so doing introducing, for the first time in Scottish and UK social policy, an area-based positive discrimination approach targeting deprived communities. The government set up a number of such

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action research programmes across Britain to identify the problems and solutions. Two of these projects were in Scotland: the Dundee EPA and the Paisley CDP (Community Development Project). Both targeted particular housing schemes selected on the basis of socio-economic indicators of deprivation, reflecting growing evidence that demonstrated a high and concentrated correlation within such communities between indicators of poor health, low educational attainment, high crime rates and income poverty; one overlapping the other. This was not a picture unique to Dundee. It was to be found across much of urban Scotland.

The arrival of community education and community development in Scottish public policy[ii]

These findings informed a Labour government-appointed Committee on Non-vocational Adult Education chaired by a former member of the Communist Party, Sir Kenneth Alexander[iii]. I interviewed him in 1975 just after the publication of his Report. He told me that his main concern was with the negligible participation rates in adult education from such areas and by disadvantaged people more generally, and the challenges for change this presented for adult education providers.

The main recommendation of the Alexander committee was that the new Regional Councils established the same year, one of which covered the Dundee city/region of Tayside, should combine their adult education and youth and community work services into a Community Education Service (CES). And that the local authorities, together with the voluntary sector, should prioritise widening opportunities amongst disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals and communities.

The youth and community work services were not examined by the committee, other than stating that it believed they had considerable experience in less formal approaches

that could be of value in promoting adult education, including reference to staff adopting a community development approach that emphasises high levels of participation in decision-making and problem solving by the community. A wide range of disciplines could adopt a community development approach, such as social workers, health workers, cultural workers, adult educators and youth and community workers.

So, the challenge of change was not simply to bring together staff from different occupations into a single service. But to ensure that they could all engage and support vulnerable and disadvantaged people more effectively. This was not to say that all community education and development work would henceforth only take place in deprived areas or with disadvantaged and vulnerable adults and young people. But it did encourage and incentivise providers to engage those they were failing to reach from poorer socio-economic groups and areas and others such as disabled people and ethnic minorities.

Regarding 'content', the Alexander committee had a radical edge, encouraging these practitioners to engage in social, health, political, environmental, international development and consumer issues, and the changing challenges of science and technology.

Professional education and training

It was to address these practice challenges that the Labour government within months established a second committee, chaired by Tayside Regional Council's education convenor Elizabeth Carnegy. This focussed upon professional education and training for community education. It reported in 1977. The committee recommended that four colleges of education, in the cities of Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen should now start training professional community education workers.

In 1975 I was a lecturer at Clydebank Technical College and was also one of a small team working with the Scottish Local Government Research Unit in Paisley. I was looking at the contribution adult education might make to community development across the new region of Strathclyde. It had become the first council in Scotland to roll out an extensive community development strategy, targeting additional staff from a range of services - social work, education, economic development and the police - working alongside the district council housing departments, the health services and voluntary and community organisations, to strengthen the development of over a hundred designated deprived areas across the region.

In 1977, I moved to the newly created Department of Community Education and Social Work at Dundee College of Education (DCE). Guided by the Alexander and Carnegy reports, in the summer of 1977 we designed the new community education courses, to replace the existing Youth and Community Diploma. The college also hosted the Scottish Centre for Open Learning and had excellent publishing and film production resources. This was only a handful of years after the launching of the Open University, and open learning, like community education, was seen as a way of reaching out to people who might not otherwise participate in formal institutional learning.

Dundee's courses

We designed a three-year undergraduate diploma, with a first-year exemption for mature students with extensive community action and volunteering experience, encouraging those with lived experience of the very disadvantaged communities they would work in. Together with a postgraduate certificate, for students holding social science or humanities type degrees. All students undertook core modules in adult education, youth work and community work, a core module in knowledge, skills and

values; core modules in sociology and psychology, and a core course exploring the various ideological explanations for the causes of disadvantage and deprivation. In the latter part of the programme students were offered a menu of modules to choose from, for example adult basic education, welfare rights, work with women, work around unemployment, international work. If spaces allowed, these specialist modules were opened up free to existing fieldworkers to support their CPD.

Thirty per cent of each course was spent on practice placements with fieldworkers across urban and rural Scotland. So, the partnership with these fieldwork supervisors was critical to ensure high-quality placement experiences. Here, we agreed learning contracts for the placement with the students and their supervisors and piloted the first fieldwork supervisors' training programme in Scotland. By the mid-1980s over three hundred graduates from DCE had entered the employment market, mostly in Tayside, Fife, Central and Strathclyde. We also supported pre-graduate level in-service training for part-time and sessional staff across Tayside, Central and Fife Regions.

Dundee publications

We saw community education not just as a practice-based professional field, but also as an emerging academic discipline. DCE was the first off the mark of the four colleges with regards to publishing books and open learning material on Scottish community education. In the 1970s there was virtually no canon of books based upon policy, practice or polemic within Scotland. Initially, all the textbooks we used in training were either from England, the US or from British practice in the colonies. We published two books, both readers on community education and community development practice in Scotland. Together with the open learning team, we produced a film on Scottish

community education and development and wrote Scottish case study material for the Open University and for the Routledge community development book series.

Dundee support for networking

There were discussions in Scotland at the time, critical of closed professions promoting their own vested interest and distance from people they support, and that we should establish a more open association for practitioners and students holding a range of qualifications and none. We supported the networking of practitioners in Dundee by convening a more open forum for those employed across the public and voluntary sectors, many as-yet unqualified, meeting every other month to share their work experiences. Then, in 1979, we launched and provided the secretariat and the conference administration for a more open Scottish Association of Community Workers (SACW). This grew rapidly in membership, with branches in Dundee, Aberdeen and the West of Scotland. We also took the lead in establishing the Scottish Community Work Trainers' Forum, which brought together lecturers from the four colleges and Glasgow University's social work course teaching community work, to meet and share teaching and learning materials.

Dundee influence at the national level

In 1982 the government established the Scottish Community Education Council (SCEC). Its first chair was Elizabeth Carnegy from Tayside. One of its first decisions was to establish a national Community Education Training Committee. This was chaired by Tayside Regions' Director of Education, Geoffrey Drought. It was tasked with reviewing progress across the colleges since 1977. I became a member representing SACW as did Ian McGowan, the head of community education at DCE. We published our recommendations to government in 1984 in a report called 'Training

for Change'. We recommended that the government give SCEC the remit and resources to externally validate and endorse the professional training courses; that employer and fieldwork interests be involved in course design; and that investment be made in the training of fieldwork supervisors. However, it took a further six years for the government eventually to approve and fund the Community Education Validation and Endorsement Service (CeVe), managed by SCEC, and to appoint Fraser Patrick, head of Tayside Region's Community Education Service as its first chair. Lyn Tett became an assistant director at SCEC to head up CeVe.

Dundee Conferences

From the late seventies, DCE was active in organising national community education and community development conferences. We invited some of the leading authorities on community education and development from across the UK, such as John Bennington, the first local government director of community economic development and a past project director of the British CDPs, Tom Lovett, a pioneer of adult education and community development, and David Thomas, one of the leading writers on community work in Britain.

One of these conferences considered a proposal that came from the Gulbenkian foundation, that a national centre or institute for community development be set up. Thomas had been contracted by Gulbenkian to consult various stakeholders across Britain. We organised the Scottish consultation event at the college, with Thomas presenting to upwards of two hundred practitioners from across Scotland. Participants were supportive of the proposal, but also felt that SCEC should be enhancing its role regarding community education's contribution to community development.

Work beyond the walls

The 1980s was a hugely divisive decade. Unemployment and poverty grew enormously. The BBC spoke of the North/South divide, the right-wing Press more pejoratively of 'welfare junkies' and 'scroungers'. The number of strikes was higher than in the 1930s, highlighted by the year long coal miners' strike. Scotland's traditional industrial and manufacturing sectors were decimated. It was against this context that, as lecturers training people to work in more disadvantaged communities, we too needed to have an outreach role. Community education has a philosophy of breaking down barriers and we were keen to use the expertise and excellent resources the college had to also bring about change in the city. We were actively involved in local projects, ranging from establishing an inner-city community technical aid centre, to securing funding for a community enterprise training centre for unemployed people from the peripheral housing schemes. We took students to the Fife mining villages to help with welfare rights advice during the 1984 strike. We partnered with others to establish an unemployed workers' centre providing adult education and welfare rights.

The Community Development Foundation

I left Dundee college of education in 1985. I felt the risk as a lecturer of becoming stale. I could see in some of my lecturing colleagues and myself the value of having a revolving door, to allow us to get out into the field to refresh our experience. I eventually joined the team led by David Thomas which established the new British agency supporting community development, called the Community Development Foundation (CDF). It had its head office in London and several regional offices supporting policy and practice. Its Scottish office became the Scottish Community Development Centre in 1994.

Thomas was especially keen for CDF to engage in partnerships across the whole of Europe. I became the CDF director leading on European affairs, and got involved with a Council of Europe report on community development prepared by a working group of its Committee of the Municipalities and Regions. I attended the launch of the report at the European Parliament chamber in Strasbourg in 1989. The report urged local authorities across Europe to adopt community development strategies and programmes. The definition of community development highlighted in the report came from none other than Tayside Regional Council.

Tayside Region's growing influence

Tayside Community Education Service (CES) set the progressive pace on community education in Scotland. Fraser Patrick was appointed head of the CES, with Stewart Murdoch his deputy. Both went on to become successive directors of Dundee City Council's Neighbourhood Service department after the UK Conservative government abolished the Regional Councils in 1996. The city, region and Scotland have been fortunate to have had senior public servants with such vision.

Reflecting back on that period, Stewart told me that he moved from Glasgow to Tayside Region because of its commitment to community education and because it was doing innovative things. His first reaction on moving there was the calibre of the staff. I'd like to hope that the quality of the staff in Dundee and Tayside had something to do with the fact that most of them had trained at DCE. By the late 1980s, its graduates were moving into middle management roles within Scottish local authorities or voluntary organisations. One of our post-graduates, Margaret Curran, became a

Member of the Scottish Parliament and, later, the Minister for Communities in the Government.

Stewart also found a remarkably strong commitment to training and staff development in Tayside. 'This was reflected at many levels but was characterised by an annual staff conference. Unheard of in other regions. These events had built a consensus around practice and in particular the value base'. Such conferences built upon those the college had organised since the late 1970s, bringing into Dundee the leading experts in the field from within and beyond Scotland. One of these events, open to wider participants, hosted Paulo Freire, the inspirational Brazilian community educator.

Tayside influencers continue to shape the profession nationally

I became the chief executive of SCEC in 1993. The first change I introduced was to set up a new unit to lead on community development, and another on European and international work. The CeVe committee was now chaired by Stewart Murdoch. It was predominantly comprised of employer/fieldwork interests from across the public and voluntary sectors who wanted to ensure that the content of the undergraduate and post graduate courses reflected the realities of the job on the ground. For over a decade since the Carnegy report, the four colleges had been in sole control of their respective course design and content. Now they had to design their courses in accordance with guidance from CeVe. And critically, fieldworkers would be involved in the endorsement panels that might or might not recommend approval. Indeed, one university course was not given approval because it was entirely theoretical, with no practice placements. Just prior to local government re-organisation in 1996, and in preparation for it, we reviewed the competences and guidance to the training providers to give higher prominence to community development and to community planning. We also published further

guidelines for the professional training of other occupations interested in adopting community development approaches. This was the first such initiative in the UK.

Growth in scholarship

The absorption of the colleges of education into universities, and replacement of diplomas and certificates with degrees and honours degrees, had a significant but not necessarily positive impact upon professional training. The student-to-lecturer ratio gradually increased. And there was evidence that applicants from disadvantaged communities reduced. Whilst students now had the professional kudos of university degrees, pressure from within the university was placed upon lecturers to teach less and to publish more. This was certainly not unique to Dundee. It did however incentivise research and academic publications across the sector.

Being keen to encourage Scottish scholarship, SCEC became the publisher of four peer-reviewed journals: the *Scottish Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, the *Scottish Youth Issues Journal*, the *Scottish Journal of Community Work and Development*, and *Concept*, the Scottish journal of Community Education Practice Theory, which was established by lecturers from the universities. By now Scottish publications were prolific and reaching an international readership.

In 1996 SCEC published a book I edited, entitled *The Making of an Empowering Profession*[iv]. The book contained a digest of all the key policy, practice and polemical texts on the making of the community education and development profession since 1975. We published it to raise the profile and confidence of the sector at a time of considerable uncertainty following re-organisation and, a second updated edition following devolution.

Local government re-organisation and its impact upon Dundee

In 1996, in the penultimate year of 18 years of Conservative government, they abolished the Regional Councils, including Tayside. The boundaries selected for the new councils were more about gerrymandering to weaken Labour control. In Tayside, the disaggregation into three unitary authorities was damaging for the CES. None had the capacity to support the central development of practice. Across Scotland there was a high level of redundancies, with qualified staff moving to other jobs or in the voluntary sector.

Dundee City Council created the Neighbourhood Services Department with Fraser Patrick as Director and Stewart Murdoch as Deputy. This department brought together the community education service, the library service, area regeneration and the equal opportunities unit. Later it changed its name to the Communities Department adding Arts and Heritage, Parks, Leisure and Recreation. The combination of these service areas gave it a much stronger and more holistic community development capacity. Indeed, from this period Dundee became the leading council in Scotland supporting a more holistic community development approach.

The arrival of New Labour and the Scottish Parliament

1997 saw the election of a UK Labour government. Its priority in Scotland was to establish a devolved Scottish Parliament in May 1999. After devolution a Labour/Liberal coalition took office in Scotland. One of the main changes post-devolution was that three ministries were created to take over responsibility for community education. Previously, community education had come under the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED), which provided central government funding for all three main elements of community education. Post 1999, this was split up. The

Education Department had responsibility for young people, the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department for adult education, and the Development Department for community work/development. This, as we shall see, led to centrifugal tendencies, and to policy differences and financial uncertainties. None were led by politicians from Dundee.

Time for a new Alexander?

In the foreword to *The Making of an Empowering Profession* Sir Kenneth Alexander had written that, after 21 years, the government should consider establishing another review. CoSLA, at SCEC's request, established an officer/member community education review group, publishing its report in 1998 'Promoting Learning: Developing Communities'. This highlighted new policy and practice challenges for the local authority community education services in light of the change of government, and the policy drivers that should inform practice which should be to promote lifelong learning, social inclusion and active citizenship. This, in turn, fed into a government-appointed committee chaired by the Chief HMI Douglas Osler, of which I was a member. Its Report 'Communities: Change Through Learning' was published later that year. These two Reports were intended to influence the incoming devolution government, highlighting changing policy and practice challenges for the field.

Together, the two Reports urged the new government to make a statement recognising the importance of community education, and to recognise the value of professional practitioners in realising the voice of local communities in the community planning process. Both Reports highlighted the value of such approaches across a range of service sectors. The Osler committee also recommended that a third review of

professional community education training be undertaken, which the government approved, appointing Fraser Patrick to chair it.

The third report on professional training is also chaired by a Taysider!

In the twenty-five years since the Alexander report, we had three national committees on professional training. All were chaired by key players from Dundee. I was a member of the new committee. We reviewed the development of the field in Scotland and of the professional training courses since the creation of CeVe, and especially post-local government reorganisation. We recognised that employment opportunities had become more diverse, with a need for more specialists, and that there was a growing need for work-based routes to obtain fully-qualified status, whereby an unqualified practitioner, found within the voluntary sector, could remain in their job and obtain their qualification part-time, and through a blend of open learning. We also called for further education colleges to get involved in training para professionals employed across the sector, and providing pre degree qualifications, whilst the universities should remain focussed upon graduate and post-graduate professional education.

The Patrick committee also called for practitioners to be professionally registered. This would be the first registration scheme for community education professionals in the world. The committee recommended that the government support the creation of an enhanced practitioner-led body responsible for the validation, endorsement, and approval of all of these professional and para-professional education and training courses and, for the registration of practitioners. And finally, it recommended a change of name for the sector.

From Community Education to Community Learning and Development

After the UK Labour government was elected in 1997, David Blunkett, who had been appointed the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, invited the various employment sectors in the British economy to bid to establish a National Training Organisation (NTO) for their respective areas. These were required to cover the whole of the UK and thus the devolved jurisdictions. They would be responsible for agreeing National Occupational Standards for their employment sector and for labour market forecasting, in order to train for future growth across the sector. For example, how many professional staff might we need in five years?

SCEC took on the leading role in forging the coalition of national organisations across the UK, embracing community education, adult education, community work and youth work interests that bid to create the NTO for what we called the community learning and development employment sector. This coalition included the main public and voluntary sector employers, trades unions, professional associations, national support bodies and the training universities from the four nations. We were able to convince these agencies, the occupations in the other three countries, and their respective stakeholders to likewise come into a single employment sector, as we had in Scotland. We launched the new organisation, PAULO: The NTO for Community based Learning and Development in January 1999. It was named in honour of Paulo Freire. I was appointed its chair. We chose the term Community Learning and Development rather than Community Education because the interests in the other three countries equated community education with community schools. For the first time ever, we had UK government and devolved governments' recognition for our combined sector. This was a labour market of some twenty thousand plus full-time professional staff and tens of

thousands of part-time and sessional staff. In 2003, it became part of the UK Lifelong Learning Sector Skills Council.

In 2001, as we finalised the Patrick committee report, Fraser, Duncan Kirkpatrick, the lead HMI for community education (and rapporteur for the Osler committee), and I met in Dundee. The Scottish HMI at the time were pushing community education to rebrand as community learning. As PAULO chair, I recommended to Fraser and Duncan that we change the name of the sector in Scotland to community learning and development, which they agreed to. The Patrick Report recommended this name change to the government.

Settling political scores

Within months, however, there were signals from the new Ministers in the post-devolution government elected in May 1999 that they were rethinking their approach, notwithstanding initial statements that they supported the Osler report and the three pillars within community education. Colin Ross, in his fascinating introduction to the second volume of *The Making of an Empowering Profession - Influencing Change: CLD in Scotland*, suggests thar 'One reason for this was that community education and community development were strongly associated by some decision-makers with what were often perceived as the failures of a previous era: as being well intentioned but weak on results, or as valuing radical rhetoric over practical impact. There were some lingering political scores to settle in the aftermath of the reorganisation of local government in 1995/96'.

This perception of community education and community development was hugely damaging to the profession. The measurement of impact was still relatively new in Scotland, with the first performance indicators being published by HMI in 1993. By the

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end of the decade, this was to become much more sophisticated. But politicians and civil servants rarely if ever read impact evaluation reports, and perceptions, valid or not, shape decision making.

Community learning and development was, and remains, a sector with negligible legal basis, compared with schools and FE colleges. As a non-statutory service, it was vulnerable to cuts. Local councils could, if they wished, largely abolish their community learning and development provision. Jobs in the field were becoming less secure. And, whilst professionally qualified practitioners were finding opportunities for more employment in the voluntary sector, such jobs tended to be short-term and at lower salary levels.

Damage limitation

In 2002, the government announced the abolition of SCEC (briefly rebranded as Community Learning Scotland). I transferred into the government as the Head of Community Learning and Development.

As a matter of urgency, I advised the government that it must issue a statement highlighting its continued commitment to the sector. It stated that henceforth three national non-government development centres would be recognised as taking over the lead to separately support the three pillars of community learning and development.

The government only decided to core fund the national development centre that supported work with young people, Youthlink, which received the grant that had previously been given to SCEC. The national development centre supporting community-based adult education, and the national development centre to support community development, only received specific and short term contract funding from government. Additional investment was put by the government into adult basic

education (ABE). At first this was to be provided through the FE colleges, until pressure from CoSLA and others, led by Fraser Patrick, successfully retained ABE within community learning and development.

Mindful of the long delays that previous governments had taken in responding to the various committees on professional education and training, I was especially concerned that the government respond with some urgency to the Patrick committee recommendations. I wrote the government's response, Empowered to Practice, which the Cabinet adopted and it was published in spring 2003. It accepted all of the committee's recommendations. The government decided that CeVe, with its extended remit, should remain in the public sector, but they could not decide where to put it. Margaret Curran, then Minister of Communities in 2004, appointed a short life task group to advise. In the interim, it was given an office within Communities Scotland, the government's new community regeneration agency.

It was not until after the SNP (Scottish National Party) had taken over the government, however, that in 2008 the Community Learning and Development Standards Council for Scotland was finally created. This was seven years after the Patrick committee report. The significant point to be made here is not that the Scottish government's decisions and indecisiveness might have damaged the sector, though to an extent they did but that, across all three pillars, the field wanted to continue to see themselves as being part of a single community learning and development profession, and have continued to do so.

Collectively, they supported CeVe and then the Standards Council throughout this period. The practitioner registration scheme was finally established in 2013, twelve years after the Patrick committee had recommended it.

Dundee's support for international networking.

Most established professions have an international body, for example the International Federation of Social Workers. Might Scotland take the lead and set up an international multi-disciplinary association for those involved in community development? In April 1999, SCEC organised a major international conference to propose the setting up of a new international association. We secured approval from the SCEC board to provide the secretariat and development support. Following publicity and direct invitations to known national networks and agencies in other countries, over two hundred participants from around the world attended the launch, from which a diverse international board was elected. The new body would be called the International Association for Community Development (IACD).

With the closure of the national community learning and development agency, we had to find a new location for IACD in 2002. Dundee was the obvious choice. The university with strong backing from Ian Ball, the community education course head, provided a free office. Dundee City Council provided administrative support and we secured grants from the Carnegie UK Trust, to which I had moved as CEO, to fund a development officer. Stewart Murdoch played a pivotal role in the subsequent growth of IACD and in persuading the Scottish Government to provide core funding. Something it has done to this day.

Since its launch, IACD has organised twenty-five international conferences, now called the World Community Development Conference, together with smaller study trips. It publishes a magazine twice a year and has a partner journal – the *Community Development Journal*. In 2016, IACD invited the Community Learning and Development Standards Council for Scotland to partner to produce a set of International Standards for Community Development Practice[v]. These were published in 2018, and have since been translated into over a dozen languages and been widely disseminated internationally. National occupational standards largely influenced by the work of the Standards Council and its predecessor CeVe have been adopted in a number of countries from Ireland to South Africa.

Footnote:

My thanks to Stewart Murdoch, Laurie Bidwell and Collin Ross who commented upon the draft text of this paper

[i] [i] I would especially acknowledge Alan Blackie, the first professional community educator to become a local authority chief executive; Jim Sweeney, chief executive of Youthlink; Duncan Simpson, the first chair and Rory McCleod, the first director of the Community Learning and Development Standards Council Scotland; Alan Barr, co-director of the Scottish Community Development Centre; Ted Millburn and Lyn Tett, the first two professors in our field. There were of course hundreds of others.

[ii] Extracts from all of the texts referred to in this article can be found in McConnell. C. ed. Community Learning and Development: The Making of an Empowering Profession. Community Learning Scotland. CLS/PAULO 2002; And in Ross. C. ed. The Making of an Empowering Profession. Volume Two. Influencing Change: CLD in Scotland. Community Learning and Development Standards Council Scotland. 2017.

[iii] Kenneth Alexander died in 2001, his funeral taking place in Dundee.

[iv] McConnell. C. ed. Community Education: The Making of an Empowering Profession. First edition. SCEC 1996; Second updated edition. SCEC. 1999. The third updated edition was called Community Learning and Development: The Making of an Empowering Profession. Ibid

[vv] Towards International Standards for Community Development Practice. IACD 2018. The application of these standards across the world can be found in McConnell C et al. International Community Development Practice. Routledge. 2022.

Book Review

Nicola Madge, 2025, *Lockdown Life-The Pandemic Experience for Older Diarists*: Bristol, Policy Press, Paperback, 258 pages, ISBN: 978-1447372530, £27.99

It is not easy to forget and wipe from our memory the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on us, whether countrywide, or individually in our homes and communities, even though it's a while since the whole phenonium hit the UK in early 2020. Each of us experienced the time in different ways and probably remember different aspects of that difficult period. Without a doubt though the pandemic and the lockdowns were to transform our daily lives and focused our attention on how the government and the authorities throughout the four nations were addressing the impact on public and personal health.

The media was to play an important role in getting public health information out to us. It was also a conduit for comment and debate on a range of issues such as the scandals of the PPE, the failure of the prime minister Boris Johnson to call the lockdown earlier especially when it was plain to most that the pandemic was global, with reports of people everywhere falling seriously ill and dying.

How can we forget the pressure to find a reliable vaccine, which thankfully came sooner than expected, and then there was the pressure to get millions vaccinated. Older people in residential homes were unable to see their relatives and friends other than through restrictive circumstances such as zoom calls. Many of these residents fell seriously ill and died in residential homes despite the Health Secretary Matt Hancock saying multiple times that the government had thrown a 'protective ring' around care homes. Then it was discovered, against the government's own public health restrictions that there were drinks parties and social gatherings taking place in 10 Downing Street. As a result, the Metropolitan Police issued 126 fixed penalty notices to participants including to the Prime Minister, his wife Carrie, and to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, the man who subsequently became prime minister. Meanwhile people formed queues outside supermarkets to purchase provisions; whilst we were all advised to wear

face masks and keep a distance from each other. Further, most children could not attend schools for weeks and universities and colleges required students to study away from their campuses. These and many more major and minor incidents make up what was taking place in the UK during the first lockdown which was announced by Boris Johnson on 23rd March 2020. The lockdowns, which continued until over a year later, were supported by legislation telling people what they could and could not do. Almost overnight many of our personal rights, and autonomy to make decisions were reduced and removed. It became a retold line that not since the Second World War had citizens in the UK had their movements monitored and curtailed in such a way. It was a time of risk and uncertainty.

Whilst the most vulnerable were directed to 'shield' themselves 'essential workers' such as those working in supermarkets, the emergency services, and hospital and care homes, together with those collecting and disposing of our rubbish and sewage, and workers ensuring our power and water supplies continued uninterrupted, were expected to keep our vital services operating, often at risk of falling ill to the contagious disease.

What we know less about are the experiences of older people at that time. Medical research indicated that older people were likely to be one of the groups at risk in the pandemic due to their immune decline. This coupled with more underlying health conditions (comorbidities) like heart disease and diabetes meant their immune systems were weaker and less able to combat the impact of COVID-19.

Fortunately, soon after the pandemic gained ground and lockdowns were announced, Nicola Madge a psychologist based at Kingston University, London, developed a research programme focused on capturing the experiences of 'relatively advantaged older men and women' living in England, Scotland and Wales. Madge has now published her findings which makes for interesting reading.

Briefly, Dr Madge asked 68 men and women over the age of 70 to keep diaries and on a regular basis inviting them to send these to her. The outcome is Madge has analysed these diaries and published her findings in *Lockdown Life: The Pandemic Experience for Older Diarists* published by Policy Press in March 2025.

The research makes engaging reading with respondents, writing under pseudo names, describing their experiences and reactions over this period. Using a mainly symbolic interactionist framework, with recognition of the political and legal context, and linked with contemporary research and comment the research findings provide a valuable commentary of life for respondents and others during one of the most prolonged and unsettling periods of UK life since 1945.

As a respondent in this research, I can claim no input into how this investigation was constructed or delivered or indeed any contribution to the findings, although I did note some of my diary recordings have been included in the publication. Further, I have no vested interest in the outcome of publication other than to hope it will inform readers of respondent's thoughts and experiences. However, it is possible to make some general comments on Madge's work from a social scientific position and how the work is presented.

I can vouch that the discipline of writing a personal diary was a useful way of reflecting on my life during the different and changing lockdowns. For all respondents it was an opportunity to consider not only one's daily routine and how specific events impacted individuals, but it also provided diarists to comment on how the pandemic was being handled by others, importantly those with influence over our lives and our wellbeing including politicians, the police, medics, and epidemiologists.

By keeping diaries during the lockdowns and how Madge has presented them it is possible to note the changing impact of COVID 19 on respondents, ranging from frustrations to feelings of fear for the future.

Diary keeping for wider consumption has played an important role in recording the life of the public in UK society. For example, Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) was for a good deal of his life a diary keeper and provides us with vivid accounts of London in the 17th century including the Great Fire of London in 1666, as well as minute detail of daily life. During the last century the Mass Observation movement was founded which gave voice to hundreds of people to describe and comment on their lives. Interestingly, one

of the three founders of the movement was the anthropologist Charles Madge, the uncle of Nicola Madge the author of the book being reviewed here.

As Nicola Madge has mentioned in her introduction, literature too is a valuable vehicle for not only presenting commentary on the times they were written but also point to universal themes. See, for example, the work of Shakespeare and Dickens.

Returning to the research presented here there are too many learning points from Madge's investigation and too short a book review to give them full justice. However, one of the findings was that diarists welcomed the government driven daily briefings and were generally thought to have linked citizens with government thinking and action. What diarists felt dissatisfied with was the rationale for the oft changing government priorities and objectives. The reliance, and some would argue over reliance, on the term 'following the science', did not always wash with diarists who wanted greater honesty, and to quote Madge 'conclusions drawn from complicated epidemiological modelling procedures were presented as factual rather than conjectural'. As one diarist commented I wouldn't mind never hearing again 'following the science'.

Overall, this is an important publication carrying details of Nicola Madge's unique research. However, Madge would be the first to comment that this is a particular cohort. They are middle class, white and comfortable people over the age of 70. They were not representative of the country. The respondents were in many ways the lucky ones. Although they were in a group at risk in health terms, they could see out the lockdowns in congenial circumstances. A longitudinal research project that investigated the impact of COVID 19 on a less fortunate, younger and ethnically diverse cohort would make an interesting comparison with Madge's findings.

Nevertheless, as social and political historians begin to write up what happened during the period that COVID-19 was present in the UK during the early 2020's, Madge's work among many others will be a valuable resource.

Keith Popple

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Book Review

Emejulu, A., Kustatscher, M. and McGregor, C. (eds) (2025) ***Ambivalent Activism: Working with Contradiction, Hesitation and Doubt for Social Change*****. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, paperback, 214 pages. Available at: https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/ambivalent-activism**

Who hasn't felt unsure or confused or conflicted about their involvement in work to change the world? Too often we bury these feelings, believing they are signs of our own weakness or that they will lead to division. And too often, when they surface, they can indeed result in hurtful division or burnout or nihilism.

But what if instead of burying them or blaming ourselves for feeling them, we find different ways of dealing with them? This is what this collection of articles from a range of social movements in different parts of the world argues.

What is ambivalence?

The editors say "to be ambivalent is to experience a contradictory set of emotions simultaneously" (p.1) and they then use a definition that expands this to include the "feelings of tension and conflict that result' (Rothman et al, 2017: 33). They argue that the "contemporary political land is replete with the morbid symptoms of an inability to hold ambivalence and work through it as political praxis" (p.2).

The book

The book is based on a series of seminars that the editors organized in 2022 and all the chapters, bar one, are based on presentations from those seminars.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is more theoretical, the second part contains chapters about activism and the final part is about academia. I initially was more interested in the middle part but found the other parts had a lot to offer. For each section, I will look at one chapter in particular that resonated with me, to give an indication of the range of the contents.

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Part 1: Theorising ambivalence

The one article that isn't based on a presentation is an article by Dorothy Gould called "On (Not) Knowing What Is to Be Done (in 17 Affective Registers)" which was originally written in 2019. One of the issues I have struggled with in my activism is uncertainty and I know my fellow activists felt the same. Not knowing what is going on or what you should do when you feel under pressure to know these things is destabilising. When you are already positioned as irrational or ignorant as many activists are, this can be even more so. Gould offers a way of understanding what might be going on and an assurance that embracing uncertainty can be a positive move. When we are frightened and under pressure, we are tempted to reach for answers too quickly, to demand a ten point programme for success, or to look to those who seem to know what they are doing. Instead Gould argues that embracing uncertainty can lead us to know what is really going on. However, no matter how much I agree with the need for this openness, I continue to struggle with being open to not knowing when I see the rise of authoritarianism across the globe. I feel we can't afford the luxury of not knowing. And at the same time, I recognise that it is this need for answers that has led us to this turn to the right.

Part 2: Activism as Ambivalent Praxis

This was the richest part of the book for me – each chapter, from a range of activisms, offered me new perspectives as well as the affirmation of recognizing similarities with my own experiences in different contexts. I have decided to focus on Adebayo Quadry-Adekanbi's chapter, "Resisting with People I Don't Like: Exploring the Internal Tensions Among Queer Activists in Lagos, Nigeria". The title immediately spoke to me. Who hasn't struggled with working with people you don't get on with? Too often, there is an assumption that if we are fighting a common cause, we should all get on. We don't of course and we realise it very quickly when we first get involved. And too often, not getting on with everyone and not addressing it can lead to differences in opinion on strategy, say, getting personal.

Quadry-Adekanbi, in writing of his experience of queer activism in Lagos, explores this, using Lauren Berlant's concept of inconvenience. Just because people share a common enemy doesn't mean people get on – this *inconvenience* – requires a lot of

us. We need to adapt to each other and to the environment in which we operate. Quadry-Adekanbi points to the different economic situations activists comes from and how these differences can cause friction. He argues for heterotopias – places where ambivalence can be accepted and where activists can work together without having to like one another.

I recognize this from the activism I have been involved with, where I now recognise but didn't then, how class background, amongst other factors, affected differences in goals and often resulted in personal conflict.

Part 3: Activism and the Ambivalent Academy

As an activist turned academic, I had hoped this part would offer me more than it did. I found all four chapters to be well worth reading but it was only Aylwyn Walsh and Paul Routledge's chapter, "The Role of 'Stuckedness': Ambivalence in Scholar-Activism" that resonated with me.

The chapter opens with an all-too-familiar of running a workshop where hardly anyone turns up which leads the organisers to wonder why – they feel stuck. This 'stuckness' is the focus of the chapter. Stuck between frustration and hope, how can they as scholar-activists, understand and work with this state? They are funded researchers in the Global North, working with activists in the Global South, working around the constraints and conflicts that are inherent in this kind of work. The key message for me is that they have found that "not eschewing ambivalence but dwelling or waiting" (p.188) offers a way forward.

Conclusion

On a personal note, it was my ambivalence about my activism that drove me to do a PhD. I had been dealing – consciously and unconsciously - with an uncomfortable mix of thoughts and emotions for over 25 years. I hadn't thought of them in terms of ambivalence. I had hoped taking time to do research would help me make sense of the complicated emotional and intellectual difficulties and in time would lead me back to activism. However, it hasn't been straightforward. For a time, I felt my research was reinforcing those painful feelings and leading me to doubt we had achieved any good.

However this book offers a different perspective. It acknowledges that that ambivalence is a common, if not universal, experience in activism and not one to suppress or ignore. It argues that, though there is no easy way to do this, and no certainty, that accepting and working with ambivalence may give us new insights and renewed energy.

It also reminds me that along with the painful emotions, I had experienced joy and belonging and certainty in the cause. It seemed that I could not tolerate feeling such a range of feelings and the negative ones dominated for a long time. So the questions I am now asking myself are:

Can we accept the despair, frustration, betrayal and cynicism, and work with them, rather than give into them or deny them. Can we welcome the joy and love that are also been part of activism? And how do we do this in a time of genocide and climate collapse?

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