

## Defending democratic youth work

Tony Taylor

In Defence of Youth Work

<http://indefenceofyouthwork.wordpress.com>

<mailto:tonymtaylor@gmail.com>

*Thirty years ago Youth Work aspired to a special relationship with young people. It wanted to meet young women and men on their terms. It claimed to be 'on their side'. Three decades later Youth Work is close to abandoning this distinctive commitment. Today it accepts the State's terms. It sides with the State's agenda. Perhaps we exaggerate, but a profound change has taken place.*

Back in March 2009 the venerable corridors of the Ushaw College in Durham were witness to this sweeping, polemical assertion on the state of English youth work. It marked the opening salvo of an Open Letter, 'In Defence of Youth Work', which aimed to dent a consensus that there was no alternative but to do New Labour's bidding. Whilst those of us involved in the animated discussions, which had kindled the Letter's passion, felt the time was right. Neo-liberalism was imploding before our very eyes. We were anxious. Behind the scenes we had been written off by notable 'shakers and movers' in Youth Work's small world as irrelevant 'dinosaurs', clinging apparently on to the past for fear of the present. In the event our anxiety was misplaced. Our effort to reflect critically on the health of Youth Work matched the diagnosis of the overwhelming majority at our first small gathering. We felt alive rather than extinct. Since then our collective confidence in seeking to influence present events has increased, of which more later.

### **Analysis and anecdote**

The background to the appearance of this call to arms illustrates a mix of both historical and political analysis intertwined with the anecdotal reflections of workers on the ground. Whilst it might now be a common-place observation, the liberal or social-democratic form of Youth Work initiated by the Albermarle Report in 1959 has been under increasing pressure since the ascendancy of neo-liberalism in the late 1970's. Back in the early 1980's the Thatcherite effort via the Manpower Services Commission to shift the focus of state Youth Work from an open-ended social education to a prescriptive social and life skills training was repelled. In the early 90's the Tory government's half-hearted ideological attempt to impose a national curriculum on the diverse and eclectic elements of the Youth Service ground to a halt. In their frustration the Conservative administration decided upon the time-honoured tactic of 'whomsoever calls the Piper plays the tune'. Siphoning money via such schemes as the Single Regeneration Budget established in 1994 towards a Youth Service reeling from devastating cuts, the plan was plain and simple. Youth Work would be brought under manners by binding the release of funding to the setting of agreed targets e.g. a quantifiable decrease in youth crime or even a reduction in the consumption of alcohol by young people! As it was the monitoring of this approach was initially sloppy, but the writing was on the wall. And, if those youth workers gyrating with glee at the accession of New Labour in 1997 thought the graffiti would be jet washed from the wall in the name of a fresh start, their naïve hopes were to be dashed. The fixation on the Market as the elixir of existence meant that New Labour, the neo-liberal party par excellence, determined to push ahead with a target and

outcomes-led, instrumental approach to work with young people. Policy documents such as 'Transforming Youth Work' (DES 2002) and 'Youth Matters' (HMG 2005) were no more than “prospectuses for the delivery of mostly agreed priorities and outcomes” (Jeffs & Smith 2008: 281). Thus across this last decade youth workers and youth managers have been cajoled and coaxed into embracing the very antithesis of the person-centred youth work process: predictable and prescribed outcomes. New Labour has shown itself to be obsessed with the micro-management of problematic, often demonised youth. In a rhetorical flourish the Open Letter accuses New Labour of possessing no vision of a world beyond the present. It continues:

*“yearning for a generation stamped with the State's seal of approval the government has transformed Youth Work into an agency of behavioural modification. It wishes to confine to the scrapbook of history the idea that Youth Work is volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees.”*

This overview of the intent and impact of neo-liberal social policy has been transfused into life through the actual observations of workers struggling in the muddy mess of practice. Across meeting after meeting their repressed and alienated voices are beginning to be heard. Amongst their fears are:

- That their values and principles are under such attack that they are losing a belief in what they are doing.
- That universal services are disappearing in the face of the targeted agenda e.g. in the name of 'preventing violent terrorism' or dealing with anti-social behaviour at weekends.
- That they are being directed towards an individualised case work approach, 'working on young people rather than with them'.
- That the emphasis on accredited outcomes is undermining their commitment to association on young people's terms and to the building of relationships.
- That they are being incorporated increasingly into the surveillance and policing of young people, symbolised by the pressure on detached workers to join forces with the police in 'managing the streets'.
- That the management imperative to procure 'hard' evidence is generating a culture of deceit, wherein workers falsify numbers and outcomes for fear of reprisal.
- That training and education is failing often to produce questioning and critical practitioners, paralleled by a suppression of critical dialogue within the workplace itself.
- That the role of volunteers and part-time workers is being cheapened and overlooked.
- That crucially the voluntary basis of their engagement with young people is in peril.
- And that young people themselves are being demeaned, having their rights taken away.

[based largely on a report produced by the North-East Steering Group, November 2009 and on conversations during 2009 in Wigan, Sheffield and London.]

These cries of concern echo the findings of Jean Spence's 'An Everyday Journey' (2007) which concentrated on part-time workers and young people, and 'Squaring the Circle', a self-styled modest inquiry initiated by the De Montfort University, led by Bernard Davies and Brian Merton (2009), which interviewed both workers and management. To take but two quotations from these searching investigations:

*“Is this research going to tell the big bosses to stop them (the workers) doing loads of paperwork. Because it's crap. Because it's all changed from the young people to computers and paperwork. And it sucks! It's like you come and you expect things to be happening, like it used to, and they're just talking about paperwork.”* (Young Woman in Focus Group: Spence, 2007:2).

*“The style of management is based on control at all costs. It's as if they fear, that if they don't control, a disaster will happen . . . . Even if we are not the one who has made a mistake it affects us all: we can't put a letter out without running it past a manager. It squeezes the juice out of you: you wish for and desire to be trusted and to be more equal.”* (DMU, 2009 :42).

To return for a moment to social policy, Jeffs and Smith place these anxieties and frustrations in a political context, within which we need to question:

- The shift from locally negotiated plans to centrally defined targets and indicators.
- The growing emphasis on the potentially deviant or dysfunctional young person as the centre of Youth Work's attention.
- The changing role of the youth worker from being a social educator to becoming a social entrepreneur, selling both themselves and young people in the market place.
- The delicate issue of to what extent professionalisation, hand in hand with bureaucratisation, has assisted the suffocating grip of rules and regulations upon the work and played its part in the exclusion of the volunteer, once the lifeblood of the old Youth Service.

(drawn from Jeffs and Smith 2008).

### **A matter of timing**

Nevertheless having sketched this scenario we are troubled by a conspicuous lacuna. Both the trenchant critique of neo-liberalism and the rumbling dissent of workers have been available and known about for the past decade. For example, in 2005 Bernard Davies produced an eloquent and carefully considered argument in support of classic 'democratic' youth work, 'A Manifesto for Our Times'. Whilst it ruffled a few feathers, it was not taken up by organisations, such as the then Association of Principal Youth & Community Officers, for whom it offered a lifeline in clarifying the tension between the government's demands and the cherished traditions of the work. During this period too the Critically Chatting Collective, a small group of argumentative workers, of which I am the coordinator, organised meetings around such themes as 'Youth Matters' and 'Democratic Management: A Contradiction in Terms?', together with setting up a web site to stimulate debate. Interest in our dissidence was expressed, but we were not overrun in the rush. The overwhelming feeling seemed to be that there was no option but to make the best - dependent on your rationalisation - of either a good or bad job.

Then, dramatically in late 2008, the neo-liberal project imploded. As Paul Mason concluded, “.. a deregulated banking system brought the entire economy of the world to the brink of collapse. It was the product of giant hubris and the untrammelled power of a financial elite.” (Mason 2008: 173). Alluding both to Marx and J.S.Mill, the Open Letter grabbed the chance, exclaiming:

*But History is an unruly character. In the space of only a few months everything has been turned upside down. Capitalism is revealed yet again as a system of crisis: 'all that is solid melts into air'. Society is shocked into waking from 'the deep slumber of decided opinion'. The arrogant confidence of those embracing the so-called 'new managerialism', which has so afflicted Youth Work, is severely dented. Against this tumultuous background alternatives across the board are being sought. We believe this is a moment to be seized.*

### **Emancipatory and democratic youth work**

In grasping the opening we seek to reaffirm our belief in a distinctive form of 'emancipatory and democratic' Youth Work, whose cornerstones are:

- *The sanctity of the voluntary principle; the freedom for young people to enter into and withdraw from Youth Work as they so wish.*
- *A commitment to conversations with young people which start from their concerns and within which both youth worker and young person are educated and out of which opportunities for new learning and experience can be created.*
- *The importance of association, of fostering supportive relationships, of encouraging the development of autonomous groups and 'the sharing of a common life'.*
- *A commitment to valuing and attending to the here-and-now of young people's experience rather than just focusing on 'transitions'.*
- *An insistence upon a democratic practice, within which every effort is made to ensure that young people play the fullest part in making decisions about anything affecting them.*
- *The continuing necessity of recognising that young people are not a homogeneous group and that issues of class, gender, race, sexuality and disability remain central.*
- *The essential significance of the youth worker themselves, whose outlook, integrity and autonomy is at the heart of fashioning a serious yet humorous, improvisatory yet rehearsed educational practice with young people.*

Asserting this definition identifies a key contradiction in the Letter. Its desire to defend Youth Work is revealed as being partisan. Inevitably Youth Work is a contested site of practice, within which authoritarian and conformist models of interaction with young people have always been highly influential. The classic essay title: 'Is Youth Work an agency of social control or social change? Discuss.' retains all its relevance. This said, many supporting the Open Letter and what is now transformed into a Campaign wish to propose that any work with young people at odds with our definition is quite simply not Youth Work!

Leaving aside for the moment this tension about what constitutes Youth Work, a

contradiction that cannot be wished away, we are very conscious that it is easy to spout rhetoric on paper. But we hope in borrowing a term from the new managerial lexicon that a window of opportunity has been opened by the economic and political crisis. Our concrete proposal is simple, namely “. . . *that we must come together to clarify what is going on in all its manifestations: to understand better how we can support each other in challenging the dire legacy of these neo-liberal years.*”

### **Agitate and organise**

The response to this challenge has been encouraging. Certainly in the past year we have continued to pass the litmus test of whether we are prepared to agitate and organise. Over 30 local and regional meetings have been held with attendances as high as a hundred in Newcastle and Huddersfield. Steering groups have been set up in the North-East, West Midlands and South-East of England as a first step in developing a representative structure for the Campaign. The first National Campaign conference is to be held in mid-February at the Manchester Metropolitan University. We estimate that around 500 people, made up of a diverse mix of students, workers from the state and voluntary sectors, academics and even the occasional senior manager has been to date involved in the Campaign. There are understandable mutterings that it is time to be less defensive and more offensive in our collective activity. A change of name reflecting this shift is likely at the National Conference.

### **Catalysing a critical dialogue**

In the closing lines of the letter the plea for support is tempered by the observation that “. . . *in doing so, you are not agreeing to toe some party line. There is so much to think through together.*” In harmony with this sentiment a lively and healthy debate is indeed emerging. Amongst the questions being raised are:

Is there a unique Youth Work value base? Intriguingly the Open Letter itself never mentions values, preferring to talk about cornerstones of practice, implying that the emphasis ought to be on process and methodology (Davies 2005:3) and in the English context on Youth Work as a distinctive site of practice. Talk of values though remains central to many people's thinking. In addition there seems to be a contemporary fixation on ethics, on professional ethics. Three titles focused on 'Youth Work Ethics' will have appeared in a single year (Roberts 2009, Sercombe 2010, Banks 2010). Does this emphasis on the individual practitioner's moral dilemmas reflect the post-modernist abandonment of the possibility of a collective political praxis?

If there is an argument for the existence of a discrete Youth Work profession, what is its particular function? Whilst Walter Lorenz reflecting on the European state of affairs speaks of a general crisis of confidence in the professions and welcomes the opening of a serious debate about professionalism's place in the humanist project of “realising the human in a social context”, within large swathes of English Youth Work it is taken for granted that professionalisation is inherently good. To entertain doubts about moves to an exclusive degree profession or the imposition of a license to practice are perceived, contrary to Lorenz's desire for a historically rooted and critical debate, as “expressions of backwardness” (Lorenz 2009:21). To touch on this question raises the role of the youth work trade unions, primarily the Community & Youth Workers Union [CYWU], recently merged with UNITE, and its rival, UNISON. It poses, given the spread of youth workers across differing settings, employed on different rates of pay and conditions, the significance of the JNC agreement - defended most vigorously by the CYWU - in safeguarding the character

of a Youth Work 'on young people's side'. All of which is shadowed by defending democratic Youth Work just as the consequences of the State's rescue of the banks begin to impact on public services of every variety. The Campaign in partnership with the trade unions has no option but to take up the class struggle alongside all other State workers.

Should the Campaign embrace Community Work? Aren't the principles of engagement the same? Indeed by failing to embrace Youth and Community is the Campaign forgetting that some of the most progressive Youth Work practice has been informed by the ethos of Community Development? In Scotland it is the Community Education tradition which resists the forced intrusion of 'market' values into both youth and community work; which challenges the emptiness of governmental pronouncements on citizenship, marking the crucial distinction between 'provided' and 'demanded' spaces when speaking of young people and democracy [Shaw and McCulloch 2009].

How far has Youth Work itself compromised its avowed informal educational commitment by going along with claims that the presence or otherwise of youth provision can be measured in terms of a rise or fall in youth crime, anti-social behaviour, teenage pregnancy or drug abuse? Indeed some of the pronouncements of its spokespersons suggest that meeting such welfare targets constitute the purpose of Youth Work. Hasn't this understandable yet flawed response to pressures on its very existence given credence to the notion that within Integrated Youth Support Services youth workers are no more than providers of positive or diversionary activities?

Over the last 40 years Youth Work's training agencies have held to a curriculum founded on an eclectic broth of person-centred humanistic and social psychology mixed in with a radical sociological emphasis on inequality in society. Whatever its omissions and weaknesses it has aspired to inform a practice which starts from young people's perceptions of their predicament. Given this proud history and the fact that contemporary academic contributions such as Batsleer (2008) and Sapin (2008) maintain this commitment, how do we address the insidious intrusion into practice of an alternative soup of an integrationist European social pedagogy, a classical American insistence on the primacy of adolescent psychology, dressed up as Positive Youth Development, supplemented without any critical deliberation by such dubious pseudo-scientific fabrications as Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)? Certainly the purchase of external consultants to provide in-service training has allowed the often unquestioned import of instrumental explanations of young people's needs and behaviours, which are seductive in their simplicity, being both functional for practitioners searching for easy answers and functional for the State wanting its boxes to be ticked.

In a recent article Bernard Davies [2009] ponders, "can youth workers, but perhaps particularly senior managers now imagine a world without targets?" In advancing this concern he touches on a deep-rooted dilemma. To what extent has thirty years of neo-liberal individualism permeated all our souls? It has been sobering to discuss with the latest generation of workers their sense of isolation. As we struggle within the Campaign to renew a commitment to a collective practice in the service of young people, we cannot underestimate across this period the body blow delivered to the social movements, from which many of us drew inspiration and strength. Of course the collective pulse never stops altogether, kept alive, for example, through patches of militant trade union activity, through the resurrection of a feminist youth work

practice (FeministWeb 2008), and indeed through the response to the Campaign itself.

In thinking about renewing ourselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we must engage with the possibilities provided by the Internet. Our use of a website, of Facebook, if a touch amateurish, has brought welcome rewards in terms of both propaganda and organisation. However do the social networking sites sustain authentic, critical and collective activity? To what degree do they offer the individualised succour of an empty 'active' passivity?

In the face of the obsession with the quantifiable, how might we begin to collect our own evidence about the complex reality of the Youth Work process? In responding to this query a number of workers have offered stories of their unpredictable journeys with young people. At this moment there is significant interest in organising a research project, which pursues this exercise in Oral History by interviewing practitioners about their experiences, past and present.

Finally, if not exhaustively, we are haunted as ever by the problem of how we might forge a direct and accountable relationship with young people themselves? Such a bond between workers and young people on a political basis is rare, except sometimes on an immediate level in the teeth of cuts to local provision.

The Campaign argues that in fighting back youth workers are not alone. Indeed other parts of the Welfare State suffered the institutionalisation of the logic of the market long before it began to dominate Youth Work – adult educators, teachers and social workers, to name but a few. Thus, for example, we are forging a relationship with the Social Work Action Network [SWAN], having a place on its national steering group and are involved closely with the National Coalition for Independent Action, which is striving to reassert in the face of the State's strategy of incorporation the necessary autonomy of the voluntary sector.

Plainly the Campaign remains rooted largely in the English experience. This focus is not born of chauvinism. It reflects no more than our present composition. We are conscious that the devolution of some legislative powers to Wales, Scotland and belatedly Northern Ireland means that at a policy level there are differences of structure and emphasis. As it is a number of activists from Wales and Scotland are attending our national conference, which will open up a dialogue about what is actually going on in practice. Certainly our understanding will be enriched and a wider solidarity nourished by this encounter. The hope is that our effort to organise will encourage similar initiatives across the British Isles. If it is not too grandiose an ambition we wish as well to reach out to youth workers in mainland Europe. How far does our analysis chime with their experiences in such a myriad of settings? We are aware that valuable links are being made at an academic level through the History of Youth Work in Europe group. What we are unsure of, is whether on the ground European workers, operating in contrasting national situations, are motivated by their circumstances to organise autonomously in defence of an emancipatory and democratic Youth Work?

To speak of the European dimension is to summon up the spectre of social pedagogy, which is mistrusted, half-understood and little debated in British Youth Work. We touched earlier on the appearance of a conformist social pedagogy in state-sponsored work, which emphasises 'formation rather than education', imposed rules rather than open dialogue.[Jeffs and Smith 2009]. However the British notion of social education is blighted by the same contradiction. Its aim is more often to socialise rather than

politicise. In this sense Lorenz's classic definition of the social pedagogical [or social education] dilemma retains its sharp edge:

*Is social pedagogy essentially the embodiment of dominant societal interests which regard all educational projects, schools, kindergarten or adult education, as a way of taking its values to all sections of the population and of exercising more effective social control; or is social pedagogy the critical conscience of pedagogy, the thorn in the flesh of official agenda, an emancipatory programme for self-directed learning processes inside and outside the education system geared towards the transformation of society? (Lorenz 1994: 93)*

The challenge is to support one another in becoming a collective of critical thorns imagining and creating an emancipatory and transformative educational practice. We welcome your criticism and support.

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