

Community Education in Policy: Learning to Value Ambivalence

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Community education has a long, rich and varied tradition within Scotland. This has often led to debates about its meaning and purpose. In this article I will suggest, through an exploration of the historical context of Scottish community education, that rather than trying to define the meaning of community education, we should value its inherent ambivalence. It is within the spaces of contradiction and contestation that the power structures and politics that struggle to define and shape the field of community education are brought into sharp relief. This, in turn, brings the question of purpose into the forefront of our debates and practice, and is an ever present reminder of the politics which shape individuals' and communities' lives. Through exploring the purpose of community education in contemporary Scottish policy, I will argue that community education is in danger of losing its ambivalence and ability to critically analyse and question these power structures and the social injustices they may create. This closes down spaces to view social issues from new perspectives and promote learning for democracy. In order to retain the value of ambivalence within community education, and to allow for a purpose which promotes learning for democracy, we have to explore new ways and spaces in which contemporary debates can be reframed and redefined. Rescaling theoretical debates within globalization may provide new spaces for this to happen.

When exploring the meaning and purpose of community education, it is important to recognise that it is not a universal or static term. Discourse is a social creation that is interconnected to other areas of social life, which are fluid, and constantly being (re)produced and (re)defined both spatially and temporally. Power is created and enforced through and between all aspects of these social practices (Fairclough 2006). By critically analysing Scottish community education in a historical context, it

improves our understanding of the underlying power structures that have struggled to define and deploy it, and how this in turn affects where and by what means Scottish community education has come to be situated within contemporary Scottish society.

Community education in Scotland is rooted within the fields of youth work, adult education and community development, which were distinct professional practices until the creation of the Alexander Report in 1975. Different traditions arose within each of these distinct areas due to the different ideological viewpoints that practitioners, funders, and advocates held and promoted within their fields. However, what is apparent within these separate fields is the presence of both respectable and radical traditions. Within adult education, the respectable tradition has religious ethical roots which promoted a belief that education was an instrument of self-improvement, which ultimately led to an enhanced material status and salvation (Crowther and Martin 2010). The respectable tradition within youth work was oriented within deprived urban settings of the nineteenth century and based on paternalistic middle class values which sought to raise and direct young people's interests and leisure time into 'respectable channels, with either a religious or military bias or both' (Tett 2010, p. 4). Community development, like youth work, also has links with industrialisation and the rise of poor urban settlements. Groups such as the Charity Organisation Society (COS) viewed education as a way to raise people out of poverty by self-improvement rather than addressing social circumstances and inequalities (Tett 2010). There is also a colonial influence within community development. This tradition also sought to reinforce social norms of the colonising nation and promote a healthy work force through education (Mayo 1975).

In contrast, within adult education and community development, the radical tradition had roots within 'radical working-class movements' (Tett 2010, p.5), and rejected conservative educational discourses where knowledge was something to be sought to improve oneself within society. Instead, the radical tradition used education as a way to improve understanding of social circumstances and wider political structures in order to challenge and change the status quo. Similar to adult education, there were

also traditions within youth work which placed an emphasis on more radical and socialist values, such as the Woodcraft Folk (Tett 2010).

The production of the Alexander Report in Scotland in 1975 led to the creation of the Community Education Service, which was to be used as an umbrella term, encompassing the areas of adult education, youth work and community development. While the report was mainly focused on providing interventions for individuals, the policy also provided space for the development of what Martin (2008) refers to as ‘learning for democracy’ that supported a pluralistic view of democracy, as the following extract shows:

Individual freedom to question the value of established practices and institutions and to propose new forms is part of our democratic heritage. To maintain this freedom, resources should not be put at the disposal only of those who conform but ought reasonably to be made available to all for explicit educational purposes. The motives of those who provide education need not necessarily be identified with the motives of those for whom it is provided. (Scottish Education Department 1975 cited in Martin 2008)

The promotion of community education as an instrument for democracy within this policy echoed the ideological vision that was (and still is) promoted by many community-based educators. The rise of neoliberalism during Margaret Thatcher’s era in the 1980s, and the reduction of social services and provision for welfare, created challenges for many community educators to promote and provide learning for democracy. Groups such as the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group voiced typical frustrations of working within state and policy structures which continually restricted scope for learning for democracy. They did, however, acknowledge that for community education to be able to provide spaces for learning for democracy, community educators had to place themselves within the contradictory spaces of

working for the state while also working against state policy and agenda (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1980).

What is apparent in community education as a whole, and the fields it encompasses, is the emergence of contradictory themes that have been appropriated by various political and social movements. Traditions such as respectable adult education, paternalistic youth work and community development traditions rooted in colonialism have promoted and reinforced the status quo. In contrast, traditions such as radical adult education and socialist based youth work, like the Woodcraft Folk, have challenged the status quo and promoted a dissenting attitude. These traditions also bring into sharp relief the political aspect of education and how community education ideology can be used to promote education as a transformative or adaptive process (Martin 2006).

Another contradictory aspect of community education within Scottish traditions is the distinction between education as self-help for the individual and education as a way to redefine collective experience. Mills (1959) draws on this distinction when he refers to 'private troubles' and 'public issues'. He argues that within society frustration and indifference occurs when public issues are represented as private troubles, creating a sense of helplessness within individuals and a lack of agency to address their circumstances (Mills 1959). Framing public issues as individual problems can be seen in areas such as education projects run by the COS, for example.. The COS focused on raising people out of poverty by increasing their skills rather than addressing the social structures which entrenched poverty (Tett 2010). In this area, community education focuses on helping individuals to engage with opportunities, rather than focusing on the issue, that for many, these opportunities do not exist. Portraying social problems in this way allows governments and welfare systems to sidestep responsibility, 'neatly placing the blame for social divisions at the feet of the victims' (Ledwith 2007, p. 288) and ignore the overarching power structures that create these inequalities.

What becomes clear when exploring the historical context of Scottish community education is the emergence of contradictory meanings within the field. These contradictory meanings have led to community education being used for purposes of regulation and control, but also for purposes of radicalism and change within Scotland. One of the reasons for this is the different traditions that community education encompasses and the different ideologies in which they are based (Tett 2010). I would, however, argue that this is not the only reason for the ambiguity of what community education means. The concept of community is also ambiguous, which contributes to the contested meanings and purposes of community education. As Mayo (1994) argues community 'has been contested, fought over and appropriated for different uses and interests to justify different politics, policies and practices' (cited in Shaw 2007, p.24). Due to this, definitions of community can be very paradoxical - something to be both desired and rejected, to protect and to be sought (Bauman 2001). Ideally the interpretation of community can impact on the meaning and purpose of community education and whether it is seen as a tool to challenge or preserve a community's existence, identity and actions.

To draw on what I have discussed so far, I would argue that neither community nor community education are neutral terms. Community educators cannot be neutral facilitators of community practice. To ignore the underlying power structures and contested meanings of community education is to unwittingly reinforce the dominant ideologies which are reproduced through hegemonic discourses. To provide spaces where community education's purpose can be 'education *within* and *for* communities' (Tett 2010, p.1), which I believe is a core function of community education, we have to adopt a practice which explores the power struggles and processes which underly the contested meanings. I would suggest that the ambiguity of the meaning of community education provides a function to create spaces where these power structures and politics of community education can be explored. Shaw (2008a) expands on Martin's (1987) idea of 'functional ambiguity' and argues that to avoid the looseness of ambiguity, the ambivalence of community education should be embraced, where its contradictions are seen as an inherent value in theory and practice. This shifts the focus from defining the meaning of community education to

focusing on the power struggles that have taken place to frame and claim it, thus creating spaces to explore alternative ways of understanding our lives in ways which differ from hegemonic discourses. To ultimately, ‘make a particular kind of politics pedagogical’ (Martin 2006, p. 15).

Keeping the ambivalence of community education at the forefront of our debates and practice allows us to critically analyse the purpose of community education in contemporary Scottish society. In this next section I will consider the purpose of community education within the context of the ‘Working and Learning Together to Build Stronger Communities’ (WALT) policy (Scottish Executive 2004). This policy is a central document for the Scottish Government’s vision for community learning and development within contemporary Scottish society (Scottish Government 2012). I will suggest that the ambivalence of community education, which I have argued is a key value of community education, is placed in jeopardy through the representation of community education within this policy framework.

A significant issue in WALT is the change of terminology from community education to ‘community learning and development’ (CLD) (Scottish Executive 2004, p.7). This change from education to learning changes the emphasis from the ‘agency of the educator’ to the ‘subjectivity of the learner’ (Martin 2006, p.15). Due to this, the policy renders the educator invisible and removes spaces for discussion about how the education process should be framed and what the curriculum should consist of. In removing this space for discussion, an adaptive view of education is promoted within WALT (Tett 2010).

The change from educator to learner within WALT also shifts the focus of the policy onto the responsibility of the learner. This is emphasised in WALT’s outcomes of ‘improved core skills, allowing individuals ... to tackle important issues in their lives’ (Scottish Executive 2004, p. 8). By focusing on the individual and framing public issues as private troubles, the Scottish Government can shift responsibility for inequalities from itself, and wider political and economic structures, onto the

individual. This also contributes to reinforcing dominant neoliberal discourses within Scottish society as Shaw states:

It has been argued that the self-help ethic has performed an important ideological function by reinforcing the attack on the so-called dependency culture in ways which may have actually facilitated the shifts in policy necessary to transmute the ‘public issues’ of the social democratic welfare state into the ‘personal troubles’ of the neoliberal managerial state. (Shaw 2011, p. 130)

WALT also defines communities as place specific through statements such as ‘CPPs should identify how disadvantage impacts locally and agree responses that aim to close the opportunity gap between disadvantaged communities and the rest of the population’ (Scottish Executive 2004, p.11). It is important to recognise that in defining community as place specific, WALT reinforces the boundaries and framework for what a community is. Communities are not necessarily naturally occurring phenomena. By defining communities in a specific way and drawing lines between who is included and excluded, it (re)enforces power structures within society (Brent 2004). This boundary setting process may sweep over inequalities present within places by homogenising groups of people within a space. By defining communities through places it also restricts the scope for how and where community educators can engage with groups of individuals (Tett 2010).

Another restriction on the scope for community educators to engage with groups of individuals is the outcomes focused framework of WALT which states that ‘Community learning and development has clearly identifiable outcomes’ (Scottish Executive 2004). This ‘puts an emphasis on compliance’ (Tett 2010, p.26) and reduces the space for communities to discuss issues which are not outlined within the outcomes framework. It also reduces community educators’ ability to open up spaces for communities to discuss issues by reducing the accessibility to resources out with this framework, as Shaw (2008b) argues:

Current research consistently suggests that the opportunity for practitioners to work with community groups on issues other than those prescribed by policy has been squeezed out almost entirely by the funding regime in which workers are employed. (Shaw 2008b, p. 15)

I would suggest that community education's purpose in contemporary public life, within the context of WALT, has been to (re)produce dominant neoliberal discourses. It has done this by promoting adaptive education processes that reconcile individuals with the status quo. The policy assumes responsibility of the individual and closes down the spaces to discuss the responsibility of the Scottish Government and the wider provision of social welfare. This is not a new issue within community education. As I discussed earlier, the rise of hegemonic neoliberal discourses since the 1980s have continued to focus overarching social problems on the individual and increase social inequalities through the reduction of social welfare. What is a concern for contemporary community education is the way in which government policy has increased the state's control over the purpose of community education. By renaming community education as CLD and defining it within an outcome based framework, the value of ambivalence, that is key to community education, comes under jeopardy. If this ambivalence is lost, the meaning of community education becomes solidified, and its purpose set as a tool for rolling out dominant neoliberal agendas and ideology.

In order to promote 'community education as a political practice' (Shaw 2008b, p. 14) a focus and space that defines and explores the value and purpose of community education out with the framework of government policy needs to be maintained. Wallace (2008) places this responsibility on the critical and professional field of community education when he argues that 'as the principles and values of community education are increasingly squeezed from practice and from policy, we in the academy are increasingly entrusted with their preservation and promotion' (Wallace 2008, p. 6).

I have argued that as a socially constructed term, community education must be understood as a term that is both temporally and spatially located. Outlining the historical context of community education develops a greater understanding of the power structures that have defined it. I would suggest that exploring Scottish community education within a wider spatial context and stepping ‘out of the local into the global’ (Martin 2006, p. 17), may create new understandings of the power structures which continue to define and struggle over this area. Fairclough (2006) argues that globalization is not only about scale but also about relations and interconnectedness of relations between scales. These relations and scales are socially constructed and not fixed but are constantly (re)produced and (re)scaled. Embracing a global approach within community education would allow professionals to still engage with groups of individuals within a community setting, but it would allow the reframing of debates to occur within ‘spaces of flows’ rather than ‘spaces of places’ (Fraser 2005). Within this new scale, community education may find the space to (re)define its relationship with state policy in order to preserve its ambivalent value.

Fraser (2005) argues that social injustices are not only misrepresented in aspects of scale but also within the grammar which is used to frame them. In order to avoid reproducing dominant neoliberal discourses when reframing community education debates within the global scale, it is essential to be careful about language. Fairclough (2006) argues that the ‘globalist discourse’ defines globalization in purely economic terms. This not only entrenches dominant neoliberal discourses, but also closes off space to explore alternative discourses of globalization which embrace all social processes including ‘discourse, power, beliefs and values and desires, social relations, institutions and rituals, and material practices (Harvey 1996 cited in Fairclough 2006, p. 22). If community education debates can be framed within wider discourses of globalization, opportunities may arise to find new spaces to explore issues of power, inequality and injustice. This may protect the ambivalence of community education from the confines of state policy and avoid the restrictions of ‘globalist discourses’.

In this article I have suggested that community education has always been a contested area, and as such, a difficult concept to define. Embracing contradiction and

acknowledging the value of ambivalence for exploring issues of power is what makes community education such a valuable resource for creating spaces to discuss and challenge social injustices. At the moment, however, community education in Scotland is in danger of losing its value of ambivalence. This is due to the ever increasing influence of government policy which promotes an adaptive education. To retain a purpose of learning for democracy within community education, I would argue that it is vital that the ambivalent value of community education is protected, so that practitioners can continue to create spaces within contradictions and open up new perspectives on social contexts. Reframing and rescaling community education debates within a global context opens up the opportunity to find new spaces within the flows and interconnectedness of social relations. It may be here that we can find new places to root our arguments and allow the flowers of argument to bloom (Martin 2006).

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