

REVIEW

Concept Youth Work Reader Launch: Standing At The Crossroads: What Future For Youth Work?

The launch of this Reader took place At Moray House, Edinburgh, on Thursday the 21st of February 2013.

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The Concept Reader launch was delivered in what we may one day view as a time of great social upheaval. Many widely held values and rights are being challenged by the Conservative-led neoliberal agenda of austerity. In our communities of place, interest and practice we now need to come together, debate and organise. With the launch, Ian Fyfe and Stuart Moir provided us with a platform to think critically and creatively about the current direction of youth work and our ability to influence it.

During the seminar a real and troubling sense of discord emerged between the current state of practice and our aspirations for the field. The attendees shared deep concerns about the long term future of democratic Youth Work under an austerity regime that punishes the most vulnerable groups within society and ideologically re-imagines education as an instrumental process towards low wage, insecure employability.

‘If you want to serve the age, betray it’ Brendan Kennelly (1991, p17).

We face a struggle to preserve the democratic traditions and radical origins of Youth Work from marketisation and instrumentalisation which parallel the wider struggle to maintain socially democratic institutions in the country at large. Youth Workers traditionally aim to expose received ideas, media stereotypes and ruling paradigms, and we encourage young people to critically reflect on dominant political narratives.

‘The great enemy of clear language is insincerity’ George Orwell (1945).

The steady changes to the meaning of words like aspiration, work and welfare are a case in point. These words have been reconceptualised with a supposedly ‘meritocratic’ tone. For Youth Workers to expose and deconstruct the individualist, ‘aspirational’ and ‘meritocratic’ values foisted upon us means to expose the weaknesses in the dominant discourse around class, poverty and inequality. It means opposition to the hegemonic notion that a person’s worth is based on their personal wealth. Within community education there is a deep-rooted tradition of creative resistance, as found in protest, popular education and grassroots movements. However, the seminar made clear that this is something we need to fight for and preserve as an integral feature of Youth Work in the future.

To explain how we got to this crossroads, Ian took us back in time to the 1980s. While U2 made their last good album (arguably!), the Conservative government embarked on a major restructuring of society which was interpreted through the mainstream media as the tough medicine necessary to save Britain’s epic decline. Two legacies of this can be seen in the current financial crisis and the social and economic inequality we stagger under today. Yet the ‘new’ social policy language is drawn from the vocabulary of business: performance targets; outcomes; impacts. Implicit and disturbing is the necessity of ‘competition’ – that is, competition between agencies. Competition is, by its very nature, divisive and hierarchical. The risk from our perspective is that it is reductive and works to subvert the democratic processes and principles of Youth Work by favouring a capital based business model. It shifts Youth Work from being a collaborative and dialogue-based process to a market-driven contract between an external agency and service users, re-imagined as consumers.

The seminar recognised that Youth Work is increasingly used to deliver ideologically driven low wage employment opportunities. Many young people’s reality is a cycle of in work poverty low-paid zero-hour contracts: without union representation, pension rights, sick pay or maternity leave, followed by a spell on jobseekers’ allowance to be endlessly repeated. In the neoliberal search for profit, wages and working conditions are under constant downward pressure. Yet neoliberalism glorifies an exuberant

consumer society, while stripping the means of consumption (a living wage) from workers. Indeed, many economists have warned that the recession is caused by falling demand due, in turn, to falling real wages, which the brief expansion of easy credit could only mask temporarily. We hear talk of aspiration, but when so many young people are trapped in a hopeless structural cycle, what are we asking them to aspire to?

Youth Workers are increasingly being asked to deliver the contentious employability agenda which artificially individualises social circumstances, asking ‘why are you unemployed?’ (blaming the individual), rather than ‘why are so many people unemployed?’ (which opens up radical alternatives). The former question obscures rising unemployment, chronic underinvestment, dwindling vacancies and unequal access to university education and relevant skills training. The marketisation of Youth Work and the elevation of profit over the development of young people has led to a situation whereby Youth Work has been re-constituted as the polar opposite of its original purpose.

These were all issues highlighted by the Youth Workers present. Moreover, the attendees discussed the closure of community centres alongside the rise of politically driven targets and diminishing emphasis on practical and holistic education. Perhaps the most striking concern voiced was an overall lowering of expectations as to what Youth Work can actually achieve. Youth Work survives due to its ability to find innovative and reflexive ways of educating young people. We are only kept relevant by young people’s input and energy. Perhaps one response to this crossroads is to acknowledge the absurdity of the age but continue to find spaces and places to work wherever and whenever we can.

Neoliberalism, for all its outward and universal hegemony, is breaking down, evidenced by the global recession, rising unemployment (particularly among young people), debt incurred by deregulated finance capital, rising inequality and democratic uprisings in countries once thought to be authoritarian bastions of the neoliberal agenda, such as Mubarak’s Egypt. Youth Workers can continue to organise, agitate

and educate young people, even on the very challenges that Youth Work itself faces. It is difficult to accept that a minority of youth workers are willing to collude in the selling out of young people's futures by buying into the current 'blame the victim' discourse. The seminar was a great reminder of what we stand to lose – the radical democratic principles and traditions of youth work. However, there is real potential to collectively challenge the status quo, recalibrate our aims and claim back lost language and rights. The next steps are up to us.

References

Kennelly B (1991) Service, *The Book of Judas*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle.

Orwell G, (1945) *Politics and the English Language*, Penguin, London.

The Youth Work reader, 'Standing At The Crossroads: What Future For Youth Work?' is available free of charge from the Concept website at this link
<http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/index.php/Concept/issue/view/26/showToc>