Keeping it real? Part-time youth workers at the centre and periphery

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Equality and participation are portrayed as central principles of youth work, but it has always been questionable how deeply they are embedded in reality. Even where attention is given to anti-oppressive practice with young people, staffing structures tend to be hierarchical and undemocratic. This was noted in a review of training provision nearly thirty years ago and remains true today:

> *Part-time youth workers, paid or unpaid, occupy a contradictory position. They work face to face with young people and so are at the centre of what goes on: but they are more often than not at the periphery when it comes to many of the decisions and discussions that affect their work.* (Bolger & Scott, 1984, p.7)

Since these words were written the contradiction they expose has been strengthened by the intensification of neoliberal education and policy regimes. As youth work becomes increasingly managerial and bureaucratic, full-timers and managers tend to leave more of the everyday practice to paid and volunteer part-time workers. Many of these part-timers develop close relationships with young people, but feel alienated from the money-oriented and target-driven environments in which they work. Starkly, those youth workers who spend most of their time with young people are the worst paid and least likely to be heard.

I am researching how part-time youth workers experience their roles in this policy context. So far, twenty-five paid and voluntary part-time youth workers have contributed to the study through in-depth interviews, discussion groups or both. Participants chose false names for the purposes of the research to preserve their

anonymity. The workers are from diverse settings and backgrounds and have between one and more than twenty years of youth work experience. As an experienced part-time youth worker myself, I am combining these interview findings with reflections on my own experiences.

Of the diverse themes arising from this research, many affect full-timers as well as part-timers: love, passion and commitment for work with young people; concerns about targets, bureaucracy, stress and surveillance; struggles to hold on to principles and values; and issues of identity and equality. This article focuses instead on part-timers' perspectives on the *differences* between part-time and full-time, paid and voluntary youth work. While occasional mention was made of financial constraints, greater availability for family and other commitments, and lack of time at work, two main themes arose repeatedly: the positive focus on face to face work, and concerns about being marginalised and under-valued at work.

'I think the face to face time is what keeps you real'

The most positive side of being a part-timer, whether paid or unpaid, was repeatedly said to be the focus on direct work with young people. As voluntary sector youth club volunteer Navaeh put it, 'I think the face to face time is what keeps you real, it's what keeps you wanting to do it.' Interacting with young people is practically her only responsibility, evident when she describes a typical evening at work:

> I walk in and first thing I do is set up, like pool cues, snack bar, anything like that, and then I *literally* spend the evening going from group to group chatting to people, anything they want to talk about. If I see people on the computer I'll go, 'how's your day been, how's everything going?' They come to me, they chat to me.

As a 'young' 25-year-old who grew up on a neighbouring estate with a tough reputation, Navaeh sees herself as a 'bridge' between the young people and the paid youth workers at her local youth club. 'My supervisor said it, she said they speak to me a little different, because of my age as well, because I'm quite young, and I know about

stuff that they're talking about.' She relishes the freedom in her voluntary role to spend time with young people, and worries that as she progresses in her youth work career this will become less of a focus:

> I think if I could survive on being a volunteer youth worker for the rest of my life it would be brilliant, but I probably can't... I like it where I'm at, at the minute. If I could stay and volunteer for a while I'd prefer that, just cos I've seen the other side.

This 'other side' is seen by Navaeh and others to be the work done by senior (most often full-time) workers who are generally perceived by part-timers as having limited time to spend with young people. Consequently, many workers in the study expressed reservations about becoming full-timers themselves. Ox, for example, as a paid youth club part-timer with over a decade of experience, was uninterested in becoming a 'career youth worker' as he put it:

> I think a lot of people get involved in certain jobs that they do and they're good at those jobs, and then when they become good at them they become promoted and they lose that initial contact that they had, and it's kind of a bit sad.

Mark, a paid part-time youth worker and mentor in the voluntary sector, spoke of a 'fear of going up in youth work':

> I think that the minute you go full-time you might spend maybe fifty percent or below of your time with face to face but the rest of it is definitely gonna be paperwork. Maybe reports, funding, seeking funding, all the other stuff that comes with it.

Actual youth work was prioritised over other considerations even by those part-timers who had relatively senior positions, such as Tracy, the paid coordinator of a small faith-based voluntary sector organisation:

I don't turn up at the meetings any more. Because you know the kind of youth work community meetings where everybody sits together with what they're doing with young people and so on? I just thought, 'this is a farce! It's just going round and round,' and especially when you're part-time, the frustration is, I can either be a youth worker, or I can attend meetings.

Unlike volunteers whose roles tended not to include administrative work, paid part-timers contrasted work that tangibly benefits young people with other demands such as monitoring and attempting to meet targets, as Lucy (a paid part-time youth worker in the voluntary sector) describes:

I just care about stressing about activities for young people, you know I'd rather put my stress into, 'oh I need to plan this trip because they really want it and I don't want to let them down'. Rather than, 'I've got to write this report and I've got to kind of use words that are saying we did meet this [target]' but we didn't.

In this respect, the initial findings of my study seem to confirm the conclusions of other recent research. Lehal (2010) found that part-time youth workers in particular disliked target-driven paperwork because it took them away from direct work with young people. Davies and Merton's (2009, p.14) study of twelve youth services found that part-timers:

could seem seriously demotivated by the target culture, claiming that at their level its dilemmas were felt most acutely. They talked of pressure to get the numbers through and of crude counting and measuring by managers interested only in outcomes often unconnected with their practice – or young people's everyday realities.

Part-timers value their work because of its focus on young people, and yet they are inevitably caught up in the managerial and bureaucratic policy context. Being caught up, however, is not the same as being included.

'I *thought* part-time and full-time staff had to be given equal rights'

> Being a volunteer is quite liberating in the way that you are just able to kind of go in, do your thing, focus on the young people... but at the same time I'm frustrated with it because I've not got the opportunity to say, 'we should do this, we should take this forward and we should try this.' (Nicola, youth club volunteer, voluntary sector.)

To differing extents, most of the volunteers and part-time youth workers in this study felt distanced from decisions and discussions affecting their work. Their exclusion has been exacerbated in recent years by managerial cultures, but is based on a longer history of hierarchical staffing structures in which it is assumed that volunteers turn up and hang out with young people, part-timers do the same as well as planning activities and looking after petty cash, and neither are invited to 'full-time meetings' where policy decisions might be discussed. This difference was starkly experienced by Bridget when her hours were reduced and her contract changed by her voluntary sector employer:

> When I went onto a sessional contract I wasn't allowed at meetings any more, I wasn't allowed at the away day any more. Because [colleague]'s a volunteer she isn't allowed at meetings. Now [different colleague]'s part-time, oh, she's not allowed any more.

As well as being unable to meet with colleagues, many part-timers were not given access to vital information. This was a particular problem for Rachel, a part-time street-based youth worker in a local authority who spent several months with no manager:

Part-time staff didn't have access to any of the computers so we couldn't log on, didn't have an email address, couldn't access the intranet... I *thought* part-time and full-time staff had to be given equal rights but we never had any of that, so that's very difficult without somebody running the project.

The positive side of being out on a limb was a certain level of freedom and autonomy, enjoyed by some of the part-timers, and more particularly the volunteers. Sam, a teaching assistant who set up a youth group in her school, said of volunteering that 'I'm not under them same restrictions of being paid – I feel like it's completely liberated me'. Louise, a volunteer in a local authority street-based youth project, exercised democratic freedoms denied to her paid colleagues:

In my head I think, 'well I don't have a contract and you're not paying me, so really I could possibly bend the rules and it doesn't really matter'. And at the moment there are a lot of things people are saying 'you shouldn't do this', like protesting [against youth service cuts] for example, 'you shouldn't do this because you're a council employee'... so when they had the big council meeting that people could go and make their points to, none of the employees went because, they stood outside but none of them went in because they weren't allowed… whereas I was able to go in.

As Louise's story illustrates, many full-timers are also disenfranchised and have limited say on decisions about their work. In addition, it should be noted that not every part-timer and volunteer felt disadvantaged by their status. Leo, now a paid part-time street-based youth worker in a local authority, remembers feeling fully involved when he started as a volunteer:

I always felt even at that early time I was involved in meetings, training, you know, I did me level 3 qualification early on, which was a part-time youth work qualification that you got. And residentials, you was always involved in that, you know, getting involved in the bigger things, not just

engaging in a club or whatever. It was about taking it further and seeing the end product of initially engaging with a group.

My own experience as a part-timer has varied considerably. Voluntary sector organisations are not necessarily more democratic; I have worked in a charity where part-timers were employed on insecure weekly contracts, and a local authority team in which budget and organisational decisions were made in weekly meetings with part-timers fully included. How far volunteers and part-timers are informed and included tends to depend more than anything else on how democratically inclined their manager is.

There is a virtual consensus amongst youth workers, managers and policy makers that young people should be involved in decisions about youth work, even if this is patchily implemented. And yet, there seems to be no such consensus about informing and involving those who work most closely with young people, most often volunteers and part-timers. Alan, an experienced and relatively senior local authority part-timer put it down to trust:

> It's like, 'look, we turn up, we do our job, we do it well - trust us'. And there's not much trust in part-time workers at all... which then leads to resentment and then people become untrustworthy, because they're like, 'well, I can't be bothered'. We never get any praise for anything, we never get any thanks for anything, we're the ones doing the bloody job.

According to youth work rhetoric, young people are central and participation is a touchstone; so is it too much to ask that those of us working directly with young people should be involved in discussions and decisions about this work?

Time for change?
The most straightforward and immediate way of improving the working life of part-timers would be for youth work organisations to embed a deeper level of workplace participation: to include all workers and volunteers in regular meetings, give them

choices over how much information they would like to receive by email, develop workers' councils, and create spaces for part-timers and volunteers to support each other and share concerns and ideas. However, the effectiveness of these more democratic models will always be limited by the ways in which work tends to be valued, rewarded and organised. More fundamental changes are needed, and I will finish with some suggestions about what these might look like.

Firstly, the link between status and hours worked should be rejected, not only in youth work but on a societal scale. The assumption that only full-time work is 'proper work' discriminates against women who are more likely to work part-time, and against everyone else who needs or wants time for activities outside of their primary job. If working part-time became the norm and was more fairly rewarded, unpaid work such as child-rearing, caring and housework as well as paid work would be more fairly distributed. This change is recommended by a recent report from the New Economics Foundation (2010, p.2):

> A 'normal' working week of 21 hours could help to address a range of urgent, interlinked problems: overwork, unemployment, over-consumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities, and the lack of time to live sustainably, to care for each other, and simply to enjoy life.

Secondly, the situation where experienced youth workers are too busy for direct work with young people must be challenged. Again, this is mirrored beyond youth work and is a consequence of performance targets, short term funding, competition, technological change and bureaucracy. It also points to an under-valuing of the skills and practice of direct work with people, and an over-valuing of managerial tasks. Without transforming such policies and cultures, young people and newer colleagues miss out on beneficial contact with and learning from the most experienced workers.

Thirdly, managerial hierarchy (however democratically organised) cannot be justified as the 'only' possible structure for youth projects. For the last two years I have been involved alongside colleagues and young people in starting a small youth workers' co-

operative with no managers, where workers (all working part-time, and with different levels of experience) have equal status and equal pay[1]. We share face to face, administrative and organisational work between us, allocating most responsibilities to two or three people, and create formal and informal support structures. The organisation is by no means perfect and we are learning all the time, reflecting for example on how we can minimise informal hierarchies. Despite its challenges, our structure means that each of us is involved in decisions about our work, while focusing on our work with young people - 'keeping it real'.

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[1]   See www.voice-of-youth.org

Popular Education, 'So We Stand' and the 'Triple Self-Diagnosis'

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With funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, a novel project has taken place over the last two years under the title 'Using Popular Education in Anti-Poverty and Environmental Justice Organising: Bridging Constituencies, Building Movements, and Crossing Disciplines'. The aim was not just to take a popular education approach to promoting social change but also to make learning about popular education a central part of the process. I was a named researcher on the project, along with former *Concept* editor Eurig Scandrett, but the driving forces were Paul Routledge, a geography lecturer, and Aaron Franks, a PhD student, both shining examples, from the University of Glasgow, of how to promote popular education from within as well as outside the state. Of particular interest was that rather than starting from a community group, community workers or a department of education, the initiative sprung from a traditional academic discipline geography not something normally associated with popular education, albeit it was done in conjunction with the umbrella grassroots grouping 'So We Stand'. This article summarises what the project was about and discusses the use of 'the triple self-diagnosis', an extended activity which has stood the test of time, from Mexico to Scotland, and was useful for just such a scenario as this.

One objective of the project was to provide people of limited resources with an opportunity to learn from each other's experience of facing economic disadvantage and/or environmental degradation. From the start, then, the project hoped to bring together and form alliances between activists working in separate but related forms of activity. It was the cliché of 'starting from where people are at' - what Freire called people's 'generative' themes – and then moving out to broader concerns. The funding

applications were to ensure that the costs of bringing people together would not be a prohibitive factor.

Another was to 'provide participants with the practical and analytical tools, through popular education methods, for relating their personal experiences of economic disadvantage and environmental degradation within their communities to the experiences of other communities and individuals with similar concerns'. So the aim was both to ensure the whole process was immersed in popular education practice but also to encourage and enable people to go on to use a popular education approach themselves in their future work as community activists. This would mean that some of the training would focus more on the theory and practice of popular education itself rather than the content of anti-poverty and environmental justice.

Another aim was to facilitate a dialogue between 'popular', experiential knowledge and 'academic' knowledge, wherever it might be beneficial. In addition to those who initiated the project, a number of other, sympathetic academics were invited to participate in the process as well.

Ten day workshops were held in total, using a range of popular education methods - social theatre a la Augusto Boal, creative mapping, art and music, for example – in order to;

- help increase understanding of issues relating to climate justice, economic deprivation and privatisation
- explore environmental justice from the perspective of ethnic minority women in marginalised communities
- produce useful resource materials for community organisations and members.

The workshops facilitated exchange between different communities and groups from Govan in Glasgow (e.g. Sunny Govan Radio; GalGael), Friends of the Earth Scotland, the Afro-Caribbean Network, Glasgow Sport and Culture, So We Stand, AMINA (the Muslim Women's Resource Centre), the Women's Friendship Group in Govanhill and the International Women's Group in Sighthill. The workshops saw new collaborations between different (community, activist, and academic) constituencies - one participant

commenting that the use of popular education and social theatre saw "people interacting without the usual barriers of language or social conventions. It was successful in opening up a space for people to project their self and their own struggles".

A total of 200 participants engaged in the exercise and were introduced to practical and analytical tools through experiencing popular education and social theatre methods in action. Participants' feedback showed they highly valued the experience but recognised the need for more networking with other groups and ongoing practical help with relating popular education to their activism. Some concrete outcomes of the project were that it generated (i) a systematic 'contact exchange' between participants via the So We Stand website and email list (ii) a blog on 'popular education and environmental justice' (http://populareducationaenvironment.blogspot.com/) (iii) a Sunny Govan radio programme on popular education, using vox-pops taken from the workshops (iv) qualitative material for future community mapping in Govan (v) significant data for further research into the usefulness of this type of work. Further information on this and related projects can be obtained from the So We Stand Website (http://sowestand.com/).

Particularly since these workshops involved bringing together groups who had not known each other previously, an important first step was to try and make explicit exactly what the different groups were doing before considering what they all might learn from each other. One exercise used was the 'Triple Self-Diagnosis' developed by the Central American popular education network ALFORJA. While this can take up to a week to do fully, it can be adapted for a one-day workshop.

Starting from Practice: The 'Triple Self-Diagnosis'

True to the principles of starting and theorising from practice, the aim of this exercise is to help groups explore beneath the surface and take a fresh, objective look at what they do. The 'Triple Self-Diagnosis' requires groups or organisations to examine three dimensions of their practice: (i) Concept (ii) Context (iii) (actual) Practice. It takes the following format:

1. CONCEPT (of practice): First, the aim is to find out what people in any particular group/organisation *think* they are trying to do. The particular technique used to do this is normally a 'Brainstorm on A4'

- Each participant receives 4 or 5 blank sheets of A4 paper
- They take a few minutes to think of the 3, 4 or 5 main things they think they are trying to achieve (their aims or objectives) in their group/organisation (or in their particular role in the organisation)
- They write these down, in large writing, a separate sheet of paper for each aim/objective
- Participants are organised into groups of 4 - 5. All A4 sheets of paper are laid out on the floor (some 16 to 20 per group) and the group spends a few minutes reading them
- Groups then have to discuss all the aims/objectives written down and see if they can group them into different categories or classifications
- On a large, blank poster groups draw a column for every category they decide on. They write the title of the category at the top of the column and place all the corresponding sheets of A4 below it
- Each group's poster, showing all the objectives and their classification, is put on the wall (alternatively you can just do all this on the floor)
- All participants take time to walk round the room and see what each group has produced
- The co-ordinator asks questions to encourage critical analysis: how do the aims/objectives and their categorisation compare between groups? If they are different, why is that so? Are there any inconsistencies? Do some objectives conflict with others?
- If appropriate, the posters can be kept and written up for future reference

At the stage of classification, it is the discussion which matters rather than the final outcome: there are no right or wrong answers. In thinking through possible categorisations for the objectives, discussions move from the concrete to the abstract, from practice to theory. The co-ordinator should not provide a set of ready-made categories beforehand: at this early investigative stage, the less the co-ordinators interfere the clearer an idea is obtained of the groups' own perceptions of what they are trying to do. When the exercise is finished, the collective view of what the group *thinks* it is trying to do, inconsistencies and all, is there, objectified, for everyone to see. (If the organisation has a written constitution or stated aims and objectives, it is important that these are not to hand. The list of objectives should not be pre-meditated but come from the heart).

During these particular workshops, the co-ordinator divided the large group into sub-groupings according to the area of activity in which they were involved. Thus, people involved primarily with poverty-related issues worked together as did those working mainly on environmental issues. At the end of this exercise, there was a clear display, for everyone to see, of the collective perception of what people were trying to do, what different groups had in common and where there might be potential difficulties or divergent interests in working together,

2. CONTEXT (of practice): participants now describe the social context in which they are trying to intervene. In groups of 4 or 5, according to similarity of organisation, or role within an organisation, they 'brainstorm' what they see as the main elements of this context. The co-ordinator explains that these elements could be political, economic, cultural, organisational - anything and everything they see as important (though it is better to avoid giving examples as these may guide people to think in a particular way). Groups then do a 'poster exercise' (see below) and present their synthesised vision of the context for the larger group to de-code.

Poster Exercise

The aim is for small groups to produce a graphic, symbolic representation of their views on a particular theme and present this to a larger group for discussion and analysis. It can deal with a wide range of themes, abstract and concrete, from politics and religion to propaganda and soap opera. In the training of popular educators in Central America, it is commonly used to help popular organisations analyse the political-social context in which they are operating.

- In small groups, participants 'brainstorm' and discuss their understanding of the theme being explored. Someone notes the main ideas on paper.
- They then discuss how to represent their ideas symbolically, in a drawing. Rough sketches are made to accompany the discussion. When a final graphic is agreed, this is made into a poster.
- The small groups come together, presenting their poster in turns to the larger group.
- The group presenting the poster keeps quiet while the co-ordinator invites everyone else to (a) describe (b) interpret what they see in the poster.
- The group who produced the poster then give their own explanation to the larger group.

The small groups often interpret the context in different ways, some emphasising the local, others the regional, national or even international. The co-ordinator again asks questions to provoke deeper analysis: why are there different interpretations? Are they complementary or contradictory? Would any group want to make changes, having listened to different interpretations? The posters can be photographed or copied onto smaller paper for future reference.

3. (actual) PRACTICE: again working in small groups, participants note down what they actually do in the organisation and how they go about doing it (as opposed to what they think they do, or would like to do). This is then synthesised into a 'sociodrama' and presented to the whole group for interpretation and analysis.

Sociodramas

Sociodramas are short drama sketches which problematise unresolved conflicts taken from the concrete, real-life experience of the learners. They allow people to reconstruct this experience, analyse it from a distance, and consider options for change. Again, it can deal with a wide range of themes or topics, from the abstract to the specific, such as the conditions of health, housing or poverty in a particular community.

- Participants divide into groups (4-8 people) to discuss the problems they have experienced (or witnessed) relating to the theme being explored.
- They then select one or more of these which they think are (a) generally representative of the group's experience (b) suitable to re-enact in front of others (albeit artistic license is permitted).
- They decide on (a) the brief story-line (b) the physical layout of the room so that it resembles the appropriate location (c) who will play what character in the sketch (c) the kind of dialogue in which the characters engage.
- After some rehearsals, they act out the sociodrama in front of the larger group.
- As before, the co-ordinator stimulates wider discussion in two stages, firstly inviting people to *describe* what they see happening in the sociodrama and then to *interpret* what it is meant to reveal.
- Having heard the audience's views, the 'actors' then explain what it was all about and the whole group engages in further discussion and analysis.

Variation:
- Groups are instructed to ensure that sociodramas present problems for which they have found no easy solution.
- Once a sociodrama has been performed and analysed, it is acted out once more, only this time the audience can stop it at any point, replace the characters, improvise changes to the dialogue/storyline and try and push the sociodrama towards a different conclusion, forcing everyone to consider possible actions for

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change.

The co-ordinator guides a whole group discussion along similar lines as before: do the sociodramas reveal any problems with the practice? Do some examples of practice clash with others? Is there anything obviously needing to be done to improve this practice?

An optional, final stage of the 'triple self-diagnosis' is to reunite the analyses of these three areas - concept, context and actual practice - in what is called the 'CONFRONTATION'. What is consistent through the three areas? What are the conflicts? What requires remedial action? A full-group discussion revolves around the completion of a chart with three columns entitled 'Consistencies', 'Inconsistencies' and 'Knots' (i.e. something needing straightened out).

'Starting from where people are at' is an oft-cited mantra, not only in popular education but in adult education as a whole. The 'triple self-diagnosis' is designed to find out precisely 'where people are at', in all its variety and contradiction. When all aspects of a popular organisation's practice are laid bare and no assumptions taken for granted it provides the basis for discussion between educators and learners about the appropriate way to proceed with a programme of education and action. Participative techniques are useful for this exercise but they are not ends-in-themselves: it would be possible to do the triple self-diagnosis using a completely different set of techniques.

When the training is over, activist-educators go back to their own organisations and pay close attention to all aspects of their practice, possibly running or adapting the triple self-diagnosis themselves.

I have been using this exercise in a variety of forms for years, it provokes endless amounts of discussion and brings clarity to areas often insufficiently addressed in a group or organisation's practice. It's an ideal exercise to use or adapt when working

with a group(s) for the first time and hopefully proved to be a useful starting point for

many of the participants involved in this particular project.

References
All quotations and factual information are taken from the Report on the project written for the ESRC by Paul Routledge and Aaron Franks.

For more information on popular education methods taken from Latin America see chapter three of:
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Credit Where Credit is Due in Non-Credit Adult Education

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Introduction

The author sings the praises of non-credit adult education, and enlists a number of philosophers to help in the chorus. He examines the motives people might have for enrolling in non-credit courses, and makes the following claims: that good non-credit adult education can give us a purpose, provide some order in our unpredictable lives, encourage us to reason freely, nurture our consciousness, foster a civil society, protect valuable elements of our lifeworld, and teach us to assert ourselves.

The canteen

From my first encounter with it, I have been an admirer of good old-fashioned, non-credit adult education. My friend, David Head, an English educator, used to call it "familiar adult education". You know the sort of thing: evening classes (though some might well be in the day) in keep fit, Mandarin for beginners, quality cooking on a budget, German cinema, Chicago blues, the Brontes, public speaking, learning to draw with pencil and charcoal...

I was in England in the 1960s, and needed a job. I had done a stint of teaching English as a second language, and so I wrote offering my services to a number of educational institutions listed in a local government guide. I got a reply from an inner city adult education institute, offering me a class on Tuesday evenings called "Writing for pleasure" (not English as a second language at all). I accepted, and turned up at the appointed time at the address given in the letter—a secondary school by day and a branch of the adult education institute by night. Someone called a tutor-in-charge showed me to a classroom where sixteen people sat patiently waiting. I had prepared nothing and am not sure how I survived, but I did, and we established a pattern of

activities—critiquing our writings and swapping tips—that took us through the thirty-odd weekly meetings that made up the year.

All the classes met from 7.00 to 9.00 and, this being England, at ten minutes to eight everyone went to the school canteen for a cup of tea. The canteen was large, and there were some 200 people from all but the most exalted social strata, wearing office and casual clothes, leotards (keep fit), the odd velvet jacket and string of multi-coloured beads (the 1960s, remember), overalls (car maintenance), and whites (badminton for beginners). The sight of the canteen thrilled me. All these people were ready to come to an unprepossessing school building in order to learn. And I was quickly captivated by what went on in my classroom. I loved the buzz and the hum of it. I loved the smiles, and the frowns of concentration, and the unpressured, thoughtful conversation.

I found more work with the institute and two years later was appointed to my first full-time job in the world of adult education. My brief was to bring in "non-users", and as long as people turned up, I had a virtual *carte blanche* to set up courses on anything I liked. And I did: on rock music, black power, alternative societies, women's liberation, our planet, language and linguistics, welfare rights, the literature of science fiction …

Research

Over the years, I have encountered people who look down on the world I have just described. This kind of adult education, they say, is to do with hobbies and pastimes, and is unimportant. But they are wrong, and I want to examine why.

In the mid-1970s and still in England, I came across a small but thought-provoking piece of research conducted by a French teacher called Joelle Battestini (a Corsican name). The original paper has been lost, but I did report the research in a booklet some years later (1986, pp. 13-15), and the quotes that follow come from there.

It is commonly said that adults enrol in non-credit classes to learn for learning's sake, but Battestini felt the explanation was simplistic, and she set out to uncover more about the motives of the students attending two of her classes. Her approach was

straightforward. She asked the members of the classes—about thirty people in all—the same question over and over again. "Why do you come to this class?" She did this by distributing a short questionnaire, putting the question to both classes orally, asking her students to interview each other in pairs, organising two group discussions, and interviewing a number of individual students on videotape.

Not surprisingly she found that the answers differed significantly, and she divided these into two categories of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motives are directly related to the subject being studied. So, the first time she asked her students why they attended her course, she received these kinds of reply:

> To learn French. (One can imagine one or two students muttering "obviously", or worse, under their breath.)
> I would like to have French as a second language.
> I want to speak French fluently.

But things are not as simple as that, and other explanations emerged:

> I would like to continue my education in France.
> Mainly for travel, reading French literature and seeing films.
> To understand international phone calls I receive at work.

These motives are still associated with the subject of French and so can be classified as intrinsic, but they contain other elements related to education, leisure and work.

The research was designed to press the students further, and they began revealing extrinsic motives, that is, motives that were no longer so easily related to the subject. Battestini broke these extrinsic motives into four sub-categories.

Some students attended for *intellectual stimulation*:

> To be extended mentally.

> I want the opportunity to discuss with people whose French is the same standard as mine a variety of subjects and situations.

Some attended for *social stimulation*:

> I expect friendship.
> The pleasure of meeting people of different backgrounds and interests.

Some attended for *relaxation*:

> I expect to relax, laugh a little.
> I enjoy studying something wholly unconnected with my work.

And at least one person came to *escape*. She put it, starkly, like this:

> Because I want to forget about the terrible day at the office today and that I'll have to get up tomorrow morning.

There were too few students to allow for conclusions that could be applied beyond the two classes involved in the research. But I am not after proof of a scientistic kind. And if I am shamelessly tugging at your heart-strings by placing the office worker's response last (and returning to it regularly), so be it. I take comfort from Jane Thompson (2000) who compares "common sense" knowledge with "expert" and "educated" knowledge; and argues that common sense knowledge is replete with subjective and affective realities that carry their own validity (pp. 2, 129). There is the ring of down-to-earth truth in all of the replies I have quoted above, and an aching distress in the office worker's response.

Finding direction, making meaning

Qualitative research involves interpretation and that can tip over into speculation. I want to indulge myself in both these activities and, in the process, make a number of claims for the non-credit adult education I have described above.

I believe that the office worker was confronting a joyless existence and finding some respite, and even the glimmering of some kind of meaning, in an adult education class in French. Albert Camus writes about the meaning or, rather, the *meaninglessness*, of life, in his discussions of the Absurd. There is nothing to believe in, he says, no ultimate truth, no deity or set of absolute principles to give us direction, yet we behave as if there were. Absurd though it is, we spend our lives giving meaning to a meaningless existence. The Absurd, Camus tells us, "is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (1942/2000, p 32). We shout into the void and, driven by the lack of response, go on shouting.

At first glance Camus' theory of the Absurd may seem defeatist. If life has no meaning, why get out of bed? But the opposite is the case. If there is no ultimate power to give us direction, then we will have to find that direction ourselves. We can make our own meaning. With the Absurd comes an exhilarating freedom.

But things are not so simple. The freedom is a potential one, and it is often easier to take directions from others, to fall into routines, and do nothing. We want to act in a more pleasurable, worthy, challenging, productive or satisfying way, but we are unsure of what we actually want to *do*. Like Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1965), we are free to act, but we do not. The exhilaration dissipates, to be replaced by an existential angst.

Claim one: Purpose
This brings me to my first claim for non-credit adult education. Good adult education (and *good* in this context will take on meaning as this article progresses) can assuage that angst, and give us a purpose.

Learning involves change in the person of the learner. We gain new knowledge, and so from non-knower become knower. We develop new skills, and so from non-doer become doer. And we encounter new ideas, take the tenable ones on as our own, and so become people who think for ourselves. Many adult learners return to class with a

mixture of anticipation and apprehension. However, as we settle in and acquire new knowledge, skills and ideas, the apprehension fades. Increasingly we take control of our own learning and set our own directions. What was a collection of poorly defined extrinsic motives gives way to an intrinsic one. What was a casual interest transmogrifies into a singular purpose.

The scale of things in adult education might be small, but not always. Although my claim may seem preposterous, it is just possible that an adult education class gave that office worker a reason to live.

Dealing with unpredictability and causelessness

Camus worked at the meeting point between literature and philosophy, and the influence of his thinking can be found in both fields. In 1942 he published a study of the Absurd in the form of a novel called *L'Etranger* (translated as *The Outsider* or *The Stranger*). The main character, Meursault, is indifferent to everything and everyone, including, it would seem, himself and his own fate. There is no reason for the murder he suddenly commits apart, perhaps, from the heat of the sun on the Algerian beach where it happens.

In literary terms we would describe Meursault as an anti-hero, albeit a deeply disturbing one. In him, Camus anticipates the raucous collection of anti-heroes that populate a lot of English language novels written in the twenty-five years after the Second World War. There are strong echoes of Camus' Absurd, for example, in the unpredictability that prevails in Kingsley Amis' sharply satirical novel *Lucky Jim* (1954).

Jim Dixon is on a local English bus, desperate to get to the station before the train carries the woman he loves away. The bus is agonisingly slow, falling in behind farm machinery and trucks. Elderly passengers mount and alight, taking their time, calling out to the driver to wait. Jim grows ever more frantic.

> What actually would be next: a masked hold up, a smash, floods, a burst tyre, an electric storm with falling trees and meteorites, a diversion, a low-level attack by Communist aircraft, sheep, the driver stung by a hornet? (p. 245)

Jim arrives too late but, with wonderful unpredictability, so does the woman he loves. In an absurd anti-climax, they meet at the station *after* the train has gone.

There are strong echoes of Camus' Absurd in the causelessness that prevails in Kurt Vonnegut's anarchic novel *Slaughterhouse Five* (Vonnegut, 1969/1979). Events happen without explanation or justification. Some people die, others survive. Billy Pilgrim is kidnapped by aliens. Dresden is bombed into near oblivion although it is of no strategic importance, has no industry of any significance, and few defences …

But Jim Dixon and Billy Pilgrim persevere. If there is no reason to life, then everything depends on them. In this sense, all human beings are privileged. We are buffeted by the wind blowing from our futures (Camus, 1942/54, p. 153). Disaster can overtake us, but, equally, we may prosper.

Claim two: Order

This brings me to my second claim. Good adult education offers us a precious moment of order as a respite from the unpredictability and causelessness that can buffet us in our everyday lives.

In his classic text on curriculum design Ralph Tyler (1949) argues that learning should be ordered to meet the criteria of continuity, sequence and integration. We can achieve continuity through the reiteration of major elements in the curriculum; sequence by making each experience take the learners to a higher level of understanding; and integration by ensuring that the program has an internal coherence, and is integrated into the lives of the learners.

We do not know what made the office worker's day so terrible. However, if she were subject to workplace bullying or the vagaries of an uncaring and erratic management, then this adult education course would have provided her with a context of order in which to take refuge. More, if we assume that she was successfully learning, then just possibly that experience of week-by-week improvement was helping her persevere in an unpredictable world outside.

Longing for happiness and reason

The apparent bleakness of Camus' theory of the Absurd is misleading. There are strong emotions motivating the human search for purpose. We stand "face to face with the irrational", Camus writes, and feel within us a "longing for happiness and reason" (2000, p. 31). Camus' ideas fell into disfavour for some years after his death in 1960, but his influence in philosophical thinking in the second half of the last century is there. His explication of the Absurd anticipates some of the paradoxical writings of the "postmodernists"; and I can find echoes in critical theorist Jurgen Habermas' (1968/1987a) ideas on knowledge and human interests.

Habermas argues that we generate knowledge to meet three "human interests". We have an interest in controlling our material world, and so we generate instrumental knowledge. We have an interest in managing our social world, and so we generate interpretive knowledge. He calls these two "knowledge constitutive interests." And he identifies a third human interest that leads us to generate critical knowledge. This he describes as an "emancipatory cognitive interest", and he links it with our desire for "autonomy and responsibility" and our "will to reason freely (1987a, pp. 197-198).

In Habermas' "emancipatory cognitive interest" we can see a more cerebral form of Camus' longing for reason. In his "autonomy and responsibility", we can see the responsibility to find our own direction that Camus' concept of the Absurd thrusts upon us. And in Habermas' ideas on emancipation and "the will to reason freely" we can see something of Camus' inspired linking of happiness with reason.

Claim three: Reason

This brings me to my third claim. Good adult education provides us with an opportunity to reason freely. Freed from the constraints of formal assessment, we can set our own goals and work at our own pace. Experienced adult educators know this. They design flexible curricula, use methods that challenge us to think in imaginative ways, and encourage us to take responsibility for the way we learn.

Clearly there is pleasure to be had from learning in which we reason freely. But on occasions the experience has been misrepresented by the use of the word *fun*. Learning can require hard work. And what we learn from this hard work can confront us. Camus is talking of something well beyond fun when he associates reason with happiness. To unfetter our minds and take an argument to its conclusion can bring us to a state of deep satisfaction, a metaphysical repose, which may not be fun, but which we can legitimately describe as happiness.

I like to think that the class in French gave the office worker hope. I imagine her "terrible day at the office" had little that was positive to engage her, and required little or no use of her intellect. However, here in her evening class, removed from the pain of her work, she could reason freely, and glimpse the possibility of happiness.

Reaching out

I have always been sceptical of the idea that we are born with some internal essence that is the source of our consciousness. I much prefer the existentialists' view that existence comes first, and meaning second. As Jean-Paul Sartre would have it, we encounter ourselves as we surge up into the world—and we define ourselves *afterwards* (1946/1989, p. 349). I see evidence of this in the progress of a baby. As it responds to a caress, as it reaches out to grasp an adult's extended finger, as it begins interacting with the people and objects around it, so it becomes aware.

In Marxian terms, we generate our consciousness in a *dialectical relationship* between the self and our social and material world. Dialectical relationships contain a paradox. The objects of our thought are simultaneously in opposition to, and reliant on, each other. In the case of the self in relationship to our world, we are utterly alone, and yet

our existence as a conscious being depends on our relationship with others. We are trapped inside our own awareness, and can only ever communicate imperfectly with the world outside, but we go on trying to reach out, to touch and be touched, to understand and be understood.

Dialectical relationships create their own "universe". Each object of thought "reflects" the other and, like an image in a mirror, cannot exist without the object it is reflecting. Without the self to interpret it, the world has no meaning, and without the world, the self ceases to exist.

And dialectical relationships do not carry a single truth. They vary according to the factors that mediate them. We can examine how the encounter of the self with the world is mediated by language, or work, or desire, or culture … Nor do we tie down the concepts of the self and the world in definitions. We let them "float", changing in meaning as the factors mediating their encounter change. So in some cases we see the self as a thinking, free-willed individual, or a cog in the economy, or the product of a social class … and the world as our immediate family and friends, or the past, or the global environment … In this way we open our minds to multiple interpretations, new ways of understanding, and the likelihood of insight.

It is in this contradictory, interdependent, ever-shifting encounter of the self with our social and material world that we create the way we think, feel, and act.

Claim four: Consciousness

This brings me to my fourth claim. By taking part in good adult education, we sustain and develop our consciousness.

We engage with our social world. Because the class is non-credit, there is little or no counterproductive competition, and teachers and learners can make extensive use of

activities that promote genial disagreement and convivial collaboration. Learning throws people together. People share insights.

We engage with our material world. We run our hand lovingly along a newly planed piece of timber in a carpentry class. We come to grips, literally, with the metal hoop or the trapeze and develop a visceral feel for space and height in a circus skills class. We make a foil the deft extension of our body and mind in a fencing class.

And we engage with the social and material world in the abstract. In classes on psychology, sociology, history, and politics, we can formulate theories about the encounter of the self with the world. And in classes on literature, music and art, we can revel in the achievements of human consciousness that have come about as a result of that encounter.

When good adult education is taking place, learners and teachers engage in a creative exchange, which Paulo Freire (1972) calls *dialogic* education. In everyday communication we move from question to answer, and the person asking the question does the learning. But the learning can be limited. Answers normally come in the form of statements, and statements can be static, definitive, and lock us into an unthinking acceptance of the present.

In dialogic education, however, we move from question to question, and are interested in the answers only in so far as they lead to more interesting questions. We hone our curiosity, and develop a state of critical consciousness. We question established ways of thinking and acting, and redefine the world in terms of challenges. Freire calls this generative kind of inquiry "problematising." As Sartre would have it, we project ourselves towards a future—and know we are doing so. We *choose* what we are (1989, p. 349).

At the time of her research, Battestini was using a new method of teaching French, which had been developed in response to a Council of Europe report called *The Threshold Level* (van Ek, 1975). The method abandoned the "logic" of grammar, and

adopted the "logic" of functions and notions. In essence this was a move from instruction to dialogue. If we follow the logic of grammar, we start learning a language with the simplest grammatical structure, which is often the statement. *The woman pats the dog*. But if we follow the logic of notions and functions, we begin with the socio-linguistic needs of a newcomer to the language. These might well be performing the function of getting directions, and expressing the notion of politeness. *Could you help me, please? I need to find this address. Thank you. You have been very kind.* The prime objective of this new method was not to master grammatical constructions, but to communicate successfully. And successful communication was judged not on the ease of expression but on whether the problem was resolved. From the very first lesson, learners were placed in pairs or groups, given a linguistic structure and some basic vocabulary, set a problem, and encouraged to communicate … in French.

How did that the office worker come to say what she said? The sentiment may have been grim, but she had seen her situation for what it was. I like to think that the French class provided her with a heightened intellectual and physical encounter with her social and material world, and had drawn her into a process of generative inquiry. I like to think that for the two hours of the class each week (at the very least) she felt intensely engaged—and intensely conscious.

Enriching our lives

When the Berlin wall was pulled down in 1989 and, along with it, the communist regimes in the eastern bloc, the right wing pundits declared socialism a failure. Of course, we can challenge this assertion. The countries that were labelled socialist were travesties of socialism, and their demise proved nothing. But it is undeniable that some social theorists went looking for a different terminology. The term *community* had enjoyed its time in the sun during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and for many had proven ill-defined; and so in the 1990s a number of social theorists turned (or returned) to the concepts of civil society and social capital.

We can give a meaning to the phrase *civil society* by starting with the words themselves. *Civil* society is that part of our social world in which we are respectful of

others, and in which we cooperate rather than compete. Civil *society* fills the gap left by government, the law, the market, and prescriptive fundamentalist religions. *Civil society* is made up of that multitude of egalitarian, voluntary associations in which we can engage with others and enrich our lives.

Civil society associations take different forms. They may be a formal entity with a defined membership and a constitution, as in the case of a local dramatic society or a sports club. They may not be a formal entity, but still have a defined membership, as in the case of a car pool. They may be an ever-changing gathering of people, as in the case of a number of friends, and anyone else really, who meet in the park on Saturday mornings to kick a football around. And they may consist of little more than understandings between individuals. You and I might take turns dropping in on an elderly neighbour and, by virtue of doing so, enter into an undertaking to continue doing so.

Civil society associations perform different functions. A residents action group provides an alternative means of representation. A reading group at a local library provides a regular pastime. A Facebook user group provides a context for social contact and interaction.

The value civil society can be described as "social capital". And the measure of social capital is trust. Eva Cox (1995, pp. 15-17) describes four kinds of capital: financial, in the form of money and property; physical, in the form of the environment; human, in the form of people's skills and knowledge; and social, in the form of accumulated trust. If we over-exploit the first three, the stocks are depleted. Money is lost, forests are denuded, people suffer burnout. However, in the case of social capital, the more we spend, the more there is. If I rely on you to call in on that elderly neighbour, and you do, then my trust in you is enhanced. And if I keep to my side of the bargain, your trust in me is enhanced.

Claim five: Civil society

This brings me to my fifth claim. Good non-credit adult education contributes to the maintenance and development of a civil society. Classes are exemplars of civil society associations. They are egalitarian, voluntary groupings of people who collaborate in pursuit of common interests. Freed from competition, we can trust each other.

Again it is pure speculation, but let us picture that office worker on her first evening in the French class. She was timid, and closed in on herself. Before she had time to demur, she was paired off with another member of the group, and encouraged to speak in French. She went to the tea break in the company of that other person. Now she had an ally. In the second half of the evening, she was asked to join in a group of four, and take part in another exercise. More of this kind of collaboration followed in the subsequent meetings, and gradually she got to know everyone by name. This being England, after the fourth meeting, someone suggested that they might all go to a pub after class …

Struggling for a decent world

Michael Welton (1995) gives civil society a central role in what he sees as a major struggle for a decent world. He uses Habermas' (1981/1987b) concepts of the system and the lifeworld. The system denotes a combination of the processes of exchange, and the processes of political, administrative and legal control. In short, the system is made up of money and power.

The lifeworld denotes that almost infinite number of taken-for-granted understandings upon which we construct our social lives. We simply know how close or how far to stand from the other person when in conversation with a friend, a member of the family, or a stranger. We move, as it were instinctively, to help an elderly person who stumbles in the street.

Habermas (1987b, pp. 153-155) argues that in tribal societies of the past there was a high degree of correspondence between the lifeworld and the system. What people intuitively believed, how they communicated, how they exchanged goods and services, and how they organised themselves coincided. Habermas admits that his vision may be

idealised, but goes on to say that in such a society we can postulate a collective consciousness.

In modern societies, however, the system is "uncoupled" from the lifeworld. The economy and the power structures become alienated from the values upon which we base our everyday existence. Worse, the dehumanised values of the system begin distorting the values of the lifeworld. We find ourselves submitting to the enticements of advertising, and vying rather than cooperating with our neighbours. We are fearful of legal entanglements and do not move so spontaneously to help a stranger in distress. The system "colonises" the lifeworld, and the collective nature of everyday life is weakened.

Strengthen civil society, Welton (1995) argues, and we protect the lifeworld against the dehumanising influences of the system. We resist the colonisation.

Claim Six: The lifeworld

This brings me to my sixth claim. Good adult education can protect valuable elements of our lifeworld.

There is a radical strand to the history of adult education. From, say, the Methodist discussion groups in England in the late eighteenth century onwards, people have gathered together to learn, both for their personal benefit, and in order to make their social world more equitable. We can see this tradition continuing in the struggle by trade unionists, radicals, Chartists, and other activists to establish "an independent working class education" in the course of the nineteenth century. The tradition continues into the twentieth century in the work of people like Jimmy Tomkins and Moses Coady, Myles Horton, and Freire, and in movements like the BASE communities in Latin America. Radical adult education continues in the social movements of today, and has taken on a new form in the campaigns on the Internet, which are modes of protest, lobbying, education and mobilisation combined. And of

course this potted history is a minuscule part of the story, since an incalculable number of people throughout history have used learning in their struggle to establish fairer societies.

I might be tempted to argue that only radical adult educators can take up Welton's challenge to defend the lifeworld. Certainly they have a role to play, but so does the most apolitical of adult education classes. People come *together* to learn. There is that "buzz", that "hum". Cohesion and camaraderie develop. The participants may have gathered for a variety of extrinsic motives but their motives merge into a common intrinsic one. And just occasionally this common endeavour approaches a form of collective consciousness. Entranced by the immediacy of the learning, individuals give way to the group, and the collective care and selfless cooperation that are significant elements of our lifeworld are affirmed.

If Battestini had approached the office worker individually to participate in the research, perhaps the office worker would have refused. But Battestini asked the class as a whole. The decision to participate was a collective one, and the office worker clearly felt part of that collectivity. Let me go on and suppose that, in a collective whose lifeworld included the values of care and cooperation, the office worker now felt able to speak her mind with such terrible frankness.

Enhancing diversity, protecting individual rights

I was careful to describe adult education classes as exemplars of civil society *associations*, and not exemplars of civil society, because a truly civil society is a utopian dream. No harm in that. Utopias are useful in describing ideals to strive for, and as standards against which we can measure our current condition. We can find many societies where people live in proximity to one another without rancour, and where they expect that everyone in that proximity will abide by mutually accepted laws. Not perfect civil societies, perhaps, but places where people can live out their lives in reasonable security.

Paul Henderson and Ilona Vercseg (2010), however, bring us back to earth with accounts, from England and from middle and eastern Europe, of the breakdown of civil behaviour. They remind us "that, in extreme circumstances, civil society can deteriorate all too rapidly into civil war" (pp. 17, 18). And experience tells us that achieving a trusting society is impossible. There are always unscrupulous people who prey upon the decency of others, or unbalanced people who wreak havoc. Witness how schoolkid bullies, identity thieves, sexual predators, and the peddlers of hate and terror have misused the Internet. We need to be on guard against these kinds of people, and to temper our trust with distrust. Of course there will be occasions when we can lower our defences, but these moments of unguarded trust are likely to be when the gatherings are small and we know everyone involved.

Social cohesion on a larger scale grows difficult to achieve in the multicultural societies of today. Diversity brings enormous potential into our lives, but in times of stress can also translate into social division. In cities and towns, and even in many rural contexts, homogeneous communities, if they ever really existed, are things of the past. In these modern times there will always be strangers.

None of the above implies that we abandon the concept of the civil society, but it does suggest that we envisage a civil society that embraces those we know, welcomes the stranger, and accommodates difference and division. In this civil society we abandon the pursuit of social cohesion in the form of a common identity, and we vigorously pursue two goals. The first is to accumulate as much social capital as possible, and the second is to ensure everyone's individual rights. A civil society of this form offers us the protective, and creative, company of others, in which all of us, and this includes the stranger, can proclaim without fear what we choose to be. A civil society of this form honours the collective, and the individual within that collective, equally.

Claim seven: Assertion

And so to my seventh and final claim. Good adult education teaches assertion. From within its collective experience, we learn to develop and proclaim our individuality. Danny Wildemeersch and Ewa Kurantowicz (2011) describe adult education as

… a matter of creating public or worldly spaces where issues of torment can be debated, without the certainty that what we are saying is the ultimate right answer, but with the certainty that we are thus preserving the difference and keeping democracy alive (p. 130).

They are writing about an activist or public adult education but the essence of what they are saying is true for any good adult education activity. In a craft class we are encouraged to choose our own project, but to work in the company of others. In a keep fit class, we develop our own fitness, but do so as the member of a group. And in a class on a humanities subject, we are encouraged to arrive at our own judgment, and vigorously debate the merits or otherwise, of the painting, the book, the political theory, or the philosophical argument.

In the new language teaching methods of the 1970s, role-plays were a far cry from the banal scenarios—such as buying a loaf of bread, or going to the hairdresser—that were used in previous methods. These new role-plays involved conflict and emotion. So the students were required to play the parts of a mother confronting her teenage daughter who is still in bed at midday, a couple asking an uncooperative neighbour to turn his music down, and a woman telling her lover that their relationship is over and he must leave the apartment immediately. The students were required to argue, persuade, remonstrate, and assert themselves.

I have pushed the speculation about as far as I can, but here I go one last time. I like to think that, in the course of these role-plays, the office worker developed a taste for standing up to others. I like to think that the experience of her French class, and the companionship she found there, gave her the confidence to demand genuine change from her employers or, failing that, the courage to leave and go looking for a new job, a new career, and even a new meaning to her life. The latter is my preferred option**.** I like to think that the experience of that non-credit adult education class in French helped her redefine herself, and propel herself towards a future of her own making.

Down but not out

Fast forward from the 1970s in England to the present in Australia. The principal of an adult education college in Sydney tells me that attendance in the non-credit program has fallen to crisis levels. He suspects, as I do, that people are abandoning the leisurely yet challenging process of studying a subject over a period of months in favour of the instant gratification of the Internet.

But non-credit adult education is a sturdy plant. It is a Wednesday morning and I walk into the central business district of Sydney to attend a non-credit adult education class entitled "The Schumanns and Brahms". It is housed in a building owned by the Workers' Educational Association, which provides an extensive and varied program of daytime, evening and weekend classes. The WEA is just short of a hundred years old and, throughout that time, has remained committed to providing non-credit adult education.

Because the class I am attending meets on a weekday morning, most, but not all, of the people there are retired. One is brought into the room in a wheelchair, and others from the group help her transfer to a normal chair. In the chat that precedes the class, there is some concern expressed about an absent regular, which is allayed when she walks through the door.

The teacher is witty and relaxed, and the students respond in kind. She encourages discussion, and defers easily to participants when they have obvious expertise. The sound system is first rate and the screen large, and we hear and see great musicians play. There is a keyboard to the side of the room and the teacher deftly demonstrates a ground base that Brahms is using in the next example to be played. She poses questions. Is this concerto a conversation or a battle between the soloist and the orchestra? And she fleshes out her analysis with anecdotes and information on Brahms' life and his relationship with the Schumanns. Non-credit adult education in my hometown may be down, but it is not out.

The two hours of the class pass quickly, and I walk home through the city streets, across a park, and through the back streets of my suburb. I do not have a good musical memory. I cannot hum a melodic line back as soon as I have heard it. But emotional echoes stay with me. To end her class, the teacher played an excerpt from Brahms' "Four Serious Songs" (opus 121), and I am still moved by the soulfulness of it. I shall listen to the whole work when I get home.

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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 inequalties.

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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Community Work Today: Competing Demands In Practice

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Introduction

Community work is not a straightforward enterprise, as practitioners well know. For example, it embodies a number of key tensions which create competing and sometimes conflicting demands. This is hardly surprising given the disparate provenance, contested history and diverse contexts of contemporary community work. In fact, it could be argued that what constitutes community work at any time is inevitably the rather messy outcome of contestation between all those interests which seek to frame, deploy or regulate it. It follows, therefore, that the process of contestation, and the dilemmas of choice it generates, produce competing rationalities, although these may not always be explicit. This article explores competing ways of thinking about and justifying professional community work – as distinct from paid or unpaid activism – because they raise important political and educational questions.

Problematising community

Recourse to community has, famously, the capacity to justify policies of right, left and centre and as such has, historically, been an invaluable instrument for the state in all or any of its ideological guises. The ambivalence of community – as a frame through which both maintaining social order and addressing social disadvantage can be enacted – has long been a way of explaining its plasticity and longevity (Shaw, 2008). In other words Community has always accommodated a range of related but contradictory meanings. This potential for providing competing legitimacies for very different interests and purposes is, of course, part of the theoretical problem for policy analysis in this field, but it is also problematic for a practice which is essentially predicated on values of community participation and empowerment.

Part of the problem is undoubtedly caused by the conflation of two largely opposing rationalities, for whilst the progressive discourse of transformation and empowerment has tended to operate at a rhetorical level, it has often concealed a much more conformist and conservative reality (Barr, 1991). This kind of ideological ambivalence also poses challenging questions about the way in which community is contrived in policy and interpreted in practice. It is clear that competing visions of community have consistently jostled for authority within professional discourses, whatever the particularities of context. Certainly the tension between 'the community' singular, as an expression of inclusion and solidarity, and 'communities' plural, as a potentially exclusive experience of difference, is central to an understanding of the complex relationship between theory and practice in community work.

Theory and practice: the continuing debate

A broad distinction is reflected, historically, in the community work literature between what are seen as *instrumental* and *theoretical* models of practice (Popple, 1995; Taylor, 2003). Instrumental approaches in general tend to rely on micro-focussed functional analyses of existing professional processes in order to extract the knowledge required to inform future work. This is often encapsulated in the term 'good practice' or, in these inflationary times, 'best practice' – a model to be replicated or 'rolled out' across a range of diverse contexts. The current emphasis on outcome, competence-based approaches has enabled this functionalist model to be increasingly codified through a 'discrete series of technical accomplishments' which form the 'benchmarks' for professional practice (Shaw and Crowther, 1995). Over time these have become institutionalised in national standards of competency (eg Standards Council for Scotland, 2009). Theoretical models, on the other hand, are supposedly more interested in why community work exists at all, proceeding from an analysis of external socio-economic relations and the contingencies of context in which particular community work practices are constructed and enacted (Cornwall, 2008).

The danger, however, with such broad conceptual distinctions, important though they are, is the temptation to treat them as polarised positions to be defended. In this case process becomes reified as an end in itself regardless of purpose, and theory is all too

easily dismissed as interesting but irrelevant. Some argue that there is a pervasive anti-intellectualism surrounding community work; a suspicion of macro-focused and abstract 'grand theory' which is unfavourably compared with functional knowledge for the 'real world' as it were (eg Ledwith and Springett, 2010). Others, with equal conviction, are concerned that an overemphasis on theoretical work can drive out necessary skills development (egMcConnell, 2013). In the end, if theory does not help illuminate the problems and possibilities of practice, then it is not doing its work. As has been said, there is nothing as practical as a good theory! Notwithstanding legitimate concerns about the correct balance of thinking and doing, it can at least be said that macro explanatory frameworks are vital in order to illuminate and inform both purpose and process in practice. In these terms the idea of 'theorising practice', in which theory and practice problematise each other, may come closest to striking the right balance for a praxis which addresses both how we think about and act on contemporary concerns.

It is widely recognised, for example, that the search for meaningful praxis is futile without an adequate analysis of the ideological recycling in policy of 'community', and the contradictory position of community work practice within the wider politics of the state. If community workers are not to be regarded, and to regard themselves, as mere delivery vehicles, they need to be exposed to the kind of critical thinking which calls into question community work as an historically situated and ideologically contested professional practice. Otherwise, as Giroux (1995:16) warns, they are in danger of lacking a 'frame of reference or a vocabulary with which to articulate the centrality of what they do'. Such a vocabulary is already in danger of being marginalised, if not entirely erased, within the audit and measurement discourse that dominates contemporary community work (Fraser, 2012; Scott, 2012).

At their worst, theoretical models can serve to 'fix' or ossify practice rather than subject it to critical scrutiny. This leads Kirkwood (1990) to suggest that, instead of simply creating rationales for existing practice, theory should offer a resource for 'insight and regeneration of the *world* of practice'. In this way, theory becomes a means of problematising practice by holding it at arms length for critical scrutiny.

Conversely, the world of practice inevitably also makes problems for theory: confronting inadequate explanatory frameworks of social and political reality. For example, the reality of differentiated experience of 'community' has challenged traditional class analysis in ways which enable that analysis to be revised and extended in important ways (Meekosha, 1993). In other words, conceptualising the ways in which 'the personal', experienced at micro level, is constructed and constrained through macro relations of power (as feminists have done) has been a key resource for a practice which is concerned with community empowerment (eg Dominelli, 2006). Anti-racist critiques and those emanating from the disability literature have also honed our understandings of the multi-dimensional nature of power (eg Sondhi, 1997; Oliver, 1990).

At the same time, it becomes impossible to understand the meaning and consequences of neo-liberal globalisation – particularly at local and personal levels – without the metanarratives of capital and class which were so central to the structuralist analysis originally advanced from within the UK Community Development Project (Loney, 1983). Confronting official explanations that poverty and deprivation were caused by social pathology or institutional inertia, they pointed instead to industrial disinvestment and rundown of public services as the primary causal factor, thereby shifting the focus of community work from a sole interest in micro-level change to a recognition that those macro structures and processes which created the context in which poverty and deprivation were inevitable had also to be addressed.

It is self-evidently the case that neither theory nor practice can ever be ideologically innocent, in the sense that they can be isolated from the context in which they operate or from wider political purposes and social interests, and the historical and theoretical resources already at our disposal are invaluable for considering contemporary challenges. They also remind us that practitioners necessarily have to engage critically with values and purposes. In this sense, community work is always both a professional and a political practice.

Community work as a professional practice: the role of the worker

Ambiguity about the boundaries of professional community work has been a predictable outcome of its complex history. As Mayo (1998:164) comments: 'There have been long-running debates on whether or not community work should be defined as professional activity at all, professionalisation having been posed as potentially undermining to community activism and autonomous community movements'. These debates, rehearsed in the literature over time, demonstrate key tensions which have been a continuous feature of community work, specifically in relation to the nature and purpose of practice.

Reviewing the debate over time, Popple (in Shaw, 2004) identifies what he sees as two broad 'camps': 'those who are keen to increase community work's professional status (the technical school)' and 'those who see the potential of community work as part of a movement for greater social change (the radical school)', though he acknowledges that radical workers may use technical approaches to reach their goals. However, since the term 'radical' has become so problematic, particularly in light of its contemporary appropriation in the service of a neo-liberal agenda, Mayo's (1994) distinction between 'technicist' and 'transformational' approaches to *professional* community work may be more useful. The important distinction here is essentially a political one: whereas technicist approaches are framed within 'existing power relations' and are directed towards enabling communities to adapt to 'the world as it is' by, for example, developing resilience to change, transformational approaches are concerned with 'acting on the world' in order to change existing power relations towards greater social justice and equality. In contrast to the former, the latter approach presupposes the possibility of dissent or resistance, not as a problem but, rather, as a positive indication of and contribution to the health and vigour of democratic life.

It seems to me that this also presents a conceptual space within which *different purposes* (as distinct from processes) can be debated and contested - as a legitimate, if not vital, aspect of professionalism. In so doing, it also offers a direct challenge to the notion of the neutral professional who objectively mediates between the formal institutions of the state and the informal practices of communities. As Thorpe (1985) argues, in her critique of so-called neutrality, the 'unencumbered expert' is simply not

an option. The question is, rather, whether values are conscious and made explicit or remain unconscious and implicit. In this respect she makes a useful distinction between 'ideology-as-ism' and 'ideology as hegemony'. In the latter sense, all workers are embedded in social structures and relations of power which are not necessary visible and can simply be taken for granted. In these terms, the claim to neutrality actually makes the worker's position *more* political than that of a practitioner who is explicit about their political values, because it literally neutralises power, rendering it invisible and therefore non-negotiable.

In addition, and more alarming, it could be argued that failure to identity and articulate an explicitly educational purpose and role can mean that community workers may end up facilitating a process which actually 'helps people to tolerate the intolerable' rather than to challenge it (Shaw and Crowther, 1995). It is all too easy for practice to end up being 'hypocritical, claiming to be emancipatory while, in reality, doing quite the opposite.' (Ledwith and Springett, 2010). Despite this danger, there persists a 'facilitating' mentality across community work which is, ironically, often justified in terms of Freirian dialogue, an approach which is explicitly political (Kane, 2001). It is grimly ironic, for example, that the organisation tasked by government with the responsibility to 'deliver' community organising for the Big Society in England claims to do so from a Freirean perspective (Bunyan, 2012).

Freire (1972) famously argued that to claim neutrality is 'to side with the powerful' because it invariably means transmitting unexamined dominant values, 'thereby allowing existing power structures to continue unacknowledged'. This critique has been influential for some in making the case that neutrality is untenable (eg Ledwith, 2005). It also highlights the necessity of being *reflexive*, as well as reflective, practitioners. The capacity to examine one's own attitudes, assumptions and values and, in particular, 'dominant professional constructions influencing practice' (Banks, 2007) – to see them as problematic – can provide a useful bridge between professional and political models of practice. It is also one very effective way of maintaining a sense of professional scepticism (and modesty), bringing to the fore the agency of the practitioner. In any case, it is difficult to see how community workers can be a part of

the solution for democratic life (as they hope and claim to be) unless they can see the ways in which they may themselves be a part of the problem. A different kind of rationality is, therefore, required in order to talk about community work as an active agent in the wider politics of pluralist democracy.

Community work as a political practice: participation and democracy

It is helpful to think of community work as essentially the product of two broad sets of forces and interests which reflect the changing context of political relations in society. The first is pressure from above, reflecting the changing needs of the state and broader economic and political interests, the second, pressure from below, which stems broadly from democratic aspiration (latent or manifest) (Cooke and Shaw, 1996). The practitioner is dialectically and strategically positioned between these competing demands and faced with the tensions such a position produces. In these terms, for example, participation and democracy are situated political practices which are just as likely to produce fractured and contradictory outcomes as consensus. If the potential of this strategic position is to be realised, however, it may be necessary to create some critical distance between 'community as policy' reflecting the politics of the state 'from above' and 'community as politics', reflecting the political aspirations of local people 'from below' (Shaw and Martin, 2000). Nowhere is this more apparent in the current policy context than in the renewed focus on community empowerment and engagement.

It is clear that, as the state has been 'hollowed out' by neo-liberalism, so too have the terms of engagement in local participation (Cornwall, 2008). Boundaries between public and private are becoming increasingly blurred and the extent of the central state's sphere of influence is becoming obscured by a diversity of players whose accountability is, at best, unclear. In consequence, the relationship between communities and agencies of the state has become more complex. A necessary pre-condition for promoting participative democracy in this environment, therefore, is a serious reappraisal of the community work 'subject'.

It could be argued that formulating practice through deficit categories like the 'socially excluded' or 'vulnerable groups' produces subjects for whom a place is sought within the prevailing social order. On the other hand, asset-based approaches can too easily promote a form of individualised self-help and resilience which only serves to reinforce inequality and powerlessness (Harrison, 2013). A more expansive practice would support people in developing and expressing their own identities, if necessary in opposition to those that have been thrust upon them by the existing economic and social order. It is therefore important to bring back into sharp focus what is routinely excluded from much discussion and practice of participation – those structural economic conditions and interests which create and perpetuate *injustice* and which do not subject *themselves* to democratic processes. Lister (2007:439) asserts that a key test of participatory initiatives 'is whether they … challenge traditional power relations or simply reinforce them'. This remains a constant challenge, and highlights the necessity of thinking more carefully about the relationship between purpose, context and practice.

Conclusion

The contested nature of community work has always ensured that there have been competing demands in theory, policy and practice. The mediating position community workers occupy - between the state and certain targeted 'problem constituencies' - continues to offer a distinctive opportunity to work strategically alongside local people to support them in articulating their experience, formulating oppositional strategies where necessary, and taking action as social and political agents in their own right. This means that practitioners need to frame their practice with reference to *actual* political, social, cultural and historical particularities rather than idealised notions of community participation. An acknowledgement of the politics of community work itself is a critical starting point.

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INSPIRATIONS

Mad, Glad and Dangerous to Know

Jo McFarlane

Jo is a Community Education graduate and 'mad poet' who tries to change the world a little by showing that it is possible to be 'strong at the broken places'. Here, she writes about the people and things that have inspired her work as a poet.

When I was invited to write an article for *Concept* on my inspirations I thought "Wow! I've finally arrived!" and I had a fantasy of impressing you with a list of iconic influences to show what a politically aware, socially conscious beast I am. Originality and modesty have never been my strong points! Grandiosity and mediocrity – the twin afflictions of my bipolar illness – are closer to the mark. Perhaps that's why the people who have always impressed me most are the unsung heroes supporting the revolution from behind and being remarkable not through ideology but by quiet example.

So it's only fitting that I start my inspirations with **two people** whom you'll never have heard of, yet have had the most profound impact through their 'little way' of kindness. The first is my sister, Paula McGee, who has come through the trauma of our childhood with not only her sanity intact, but integrity and dignity. Paula is genuinely bemused when I tell her she's my hero. And that's part of the appeal. While I shine my light from a poetic platform she polishes under my feet to enhance the illumination. Carers get little thanks for the work they do but they save the economy billions and more importantly they are a testament to the transformational power of love.

My other personal hero is my community psychiatric nurse, Jenifer Neilson, who was recently awarded Scottish Nurse of the Year. Aside from this prestigious accolade Jenifer, has been the catalyst to me writing and performing to influence reform in the NHS. Recovery champion Dr Rachel Perkins OBE talks about moving from 'services

to service.' Jenifer embodies this in her commitment, compassion and extraordinary skill as a nurse.

Mental health has dominated my life as an adult so most of my inspirations relate somehow to recovery, advocacy and humane treatment. I am not alone in admiring the holistic approach of Glasgow-born psychiatrist RD Laing. But it is only recently, after reading Dr Allan Beveridge's excellent **biography** of Laing, *Portrait of the Psychiatrist as a Young Man*, that I have become aware of the range of his literary, philosophical and spiritual influences. Reading about this made me proud to belong to the Scots generalist tradition of education that informed his enlightened practice.

A key **event** which has inspired me was the passing of the Scottish Mental Health (Care and Treatment) Act in 2003. This was the first law of its kind internationally to include the right of access to independent advocacy. It may not be the most progressive piece of legislation but it has given us a voice.

Like other social movements, mad people have become increasingly conscious of recording our own history. The **place** which has led the way in developing a narrative that shapes our identity is Ryerson University in Canada. Learning about our history in an international context has inspired me to wonder what legacy will my modest efforts to change the world of mental health leave behind?

Recovery is the buzz word driving current mental health policy and it is broadly defined as 'living well in the presence or absence of symptoms', or to quote Nigel Henderson of mental health charity Penumbra: not waiting for the storm to pass but dancing in the rain. The **concept** of recovery has given me hope in the possibility of leading a rich, purposeful life even though I doubt the inevitability of a cure any time soon.

In any case perhaps it is not I who require a cure but the fucked up state of the world that has driven me mad. Like most survivors of abuse I learnt from an early age to internalise the shame and blame that made me want to kill myself. Maya Angelou's

beautiful **poem** *And Still I Rise* turns that on its head. In it she asserts the power of her own journey from victim to selfhood (leaving behind nights of terror and fear I rise into a daybreak that's wondrously clear). Perhaps I too can escape the slavery of 'illness' which society imposes on me because I have been hurt.

Likewise a **song** which has inspired and brought me comfort is Sinead O'Connor's *This Is To Mother You.* Feminism teaches us that oppression always intersects with gender. Likewise women hold the key to our own emancipation. When I feel lost this song finds me and brings me home.

An **organisation**, or collective of saints as I like to think of them, which has inspired me and at times saved my life, is the Samaritans. Like many charities it is run entirely by volunteers but rather uniquely they are all anonymous. It takes a lot of courage to support people through their 'darkest nights of the soul' but to do it with no expectation of thanks or public recognition is truly heroic.

You will notice a pattern of stoic endurance emerging in my inspirations, perhaps because it is a quality with which I little identify. One of my favourite **films** is Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) not just because of its evocative black and white cinematography, but because the protagonist – a young man sent to borstal who finds an outlet for his anger in running – does not neatly turn his life around and become integrated into the society which has rejected him. Neat endings abound in literature and film but they rarely correspond to our real lives. This story is notable because the protagonist takes advantage of the sporting opportunity afforded him by the system but remains 'his own man', using the solitary pursuit of running to forge his rage rather than as a get-out-of-prison-quick card. This reminds me of the way community educators use public resources to foster critical consciousness in people rather than as a means of co-opting them. In a context of diminishing funds it is more important than ever to remember that those of us who work for change are agitators rather than agents of the state.

So there you have it: Ten inspirations that have shaped my view of the world and which inform my work as an activist poet. Most of them relate to my experience of madness because, as any Community Education graduate worth their salt knows, the personal is always political!

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.

Ross Shoemark
Senior Development Officer
Edinburgh Team, Fast Forward

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.

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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