

Supporting People Power: Personal reflections on 40 years in community learning and development

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If you Google Wikipedia for community learning and development or community education, only two examples are referenced: Scotland and the State of Wisconsin in the USA. Apparently neither terms are used these days in the policies and practice of countries worldwide. This is surprising - not only because it is wrong but also because in fact community learning and development is a worldwide phenomenon. The term may not be being used in other countries, but this work has been part of an incredible educational revolution that has been taking place certainly since the later 1960s. A revolution that is called people power.

I have recently retired after nearly 40 years in community learning and development. I'd like to reflect in this article upon how this work developed and also my own part in supporting some of it in Scotland, the UK and beyond.

I am a baby boomer. I left school in 1968 and studied Politics and Community Development as a student. After working in a community school in Yorkshire, I moved in 1975 to Scotland and to the Scottish Local Government Unit. SLGU was the brainchild of a handful of Labour councillors who had recently been elected to the new Regional and District Councils. All were academics – including Ron Young, Tony Worthington and Ken Collins. Ken went on to become an MEP and Tony an MP. SLGU was an independent think tank, intended to provide elected members and officers with some 'out of the silo' ideas, research and training. I arrived in Scotland a month after the publication of the *Alexander Report: The Challenge of Change*, which led to the creation of local authority community education services across Scotland and the launch of Strathclyde Regional Council's community development policy as a key part of its strategy to tackle multiple deprivation.

I worked on community education and development and at the same time lectured at Clydebank FE College. My particular interest was in how educators could reach out to disadvantaged communities. I had been impressed by the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil and closer to home in Liverpool of Tom Lovett and Eric Midwinter as well as, earlier than that, John Maclean's popular adult education work on Clydeside. But it was in Scotland in the latter part of the 1970s that a number of factors and people

were about to come together to create the UK's, indeed Europe's, largest testing ground for community education and development.

Ron was the creative spirit within SLGU, a powerful Strathclyde politician and a prolific writer, with influential articles in *Community Care* magazine and in local government periodicals. My first book, *The Community Worker as Politiciser of the Deprived*, came out in 1977 and I edited a magazine called *Scottish Radical Education*, as well as being the Scottish correspondent for *Community Care* for a couple of years. Information about Scottish community education and development was beginning to be disseminated around the world. This was a place worth watching.

The Scottish Community Education Centre (SCEC) in Edinburgh was the main practice support resource centre for staff working in this emerging field. In 1977 a national Training Committee set up by the Labour Government examined the future of professional community education training. It proposed a new qualification and in effect a new profession. One of the recommendations of the Alexander Report was to establish a national body for community education and, of the Training Committee, to establish a national validating body for all professional training. SCEC was given Non-Departmental Public Body (quango) status and government funding and now called the Scottish Community Education Council, chaired by Elizabeth Carnegie, chair of the Training Committee, with Ralph Wilson as its first Director. Things were moving!

I moved to Dundee in 1977 to become part of the teaching team that designed the first community education and development professional training programme in Scotland. Establishing a national validation body moved at a slower pace. A SCEC training committee was set up under Geoffrey Drought to move this forward. I was a member of this committee, which recommended the setting up of a body to validate professional training within SCEC, later called CeVe (Community Education Validation and Endorsement). Throughout this time, however, there was a strong counter current amongst many community workers who felt that their work was more appropriately an area of social work than education. Strathclyde Region employed as many community workers within its Social Work Department as in its Community Education Service. Tony Worthington was asked to examine this. I attended a couple of meetings of his committee. His report somewhat fudged the issue by saying that community development was an 'approach' which should permeate the practice of many professionals.

This opened up a rich vein of debate in Scotland which lasted for around 20 years. Strong proponents of the 'permeation' approach included Alan Barr, who moved to Scotland in the late seventies and subsequently went on to have a major influence as co-director of the Scottish Community Development Centre. I came to know Alan well and have huge respect for him, but whilst I agreed strongly that we needed to

influence the training and practice of all public service professions and indeed those in the private sector to support community education and development, we also required specifically trained community educators. These were not mutually exclusive objectives. This was a central theme of the book I brought out with Laurie Bidwell in 1982 entitled *Community Education and Community Development*.

At this time I was also appointed as an advisor to the Multiple Deprivation Officer/Member Group on Tayside Regional Council, where we adopted many of the area-based targeting approaches initially developed in Strathclyde. I resigned from that role to fight unsuccessfully for Regional and Westminster parliamentary seats for the Labour Party. These were difficult times with the Conservative Government trying to dismantle the post-war social democratic consensus and the Miners' Strike a totemic issue highlighting the struggle of traditional working-class communities and the demise of heavy industry in Scotland. I remember taking a group of students over to Fife coal mining communities to offer help with welfare rights and community organising advice. Frankly, on the latter we learned more from them!

In 1985 I went to work for the National Consumer Council, where I headed up its UK work on consumer education, a responsibility earlier held by Eric Midwinter and linked up again with Ken Collins who was now the Socialist Group's spokesperson on consumer and environmental issues at the European Parliament. My thinking about community education and development was changing at this time. I was increasingly attracted to the potential of linking it with the power of the mass media. I had dabbled in the production of open learning resources, producing a training film whilst in Dundee and also material for the Open University. I felt that in order to scale up this work and to reach more people, we needed to move beyond the local.

I had also become interested in how to harness the power of western consumers and communities to support poorer communities in the global south, and jointly to mobilise against companies and governments whose behaviour impacted negatively upon people and the environment. This was the time of the Bhopal disaster. I worked closely with the International Organisation of Consumer Unions and produced curricula and training material with SCEC and with the Community Education team at the Open University and set up a National Resource Unit at the Community Education Development Centre in Coventry. I also joined the editorial board of the international *Community Development Journal* and published a number of papers and articles. One of these was a report critical of the behaviour of some companies that sponsored educational materials, strongly encouraged during the Thatcher years as local authority education budgets were cut by the government. Much of this was blatant product advertising and biased misinformation.

This did however lead me to a closer understanding of more enlightened corporate social and environmental responsibility and how to influence and engage companies

and professions, such as journalists, lawyers and architects in supporting community education and development. Indeed, this was the period when the prefix ‘community’ was being adopted by a number of professionals keen to support disadvantaged communities – community architects being one example, with whom I had had a close involvement since I first met Tony Gibson, founder of *Planning for Real*, in the early seventies. I chaired a working party for St George’s House at this time which picked up on this in relation to supporting the emerging community enterprise movement.

In 1988 I joined what was to become the Community Development Foundation (CDF) as one of its Programme Directors. A Gulbenkian Foundation study in the early eighties had argued that there should be a national centre for Community Development similar to the National Institute for Social Work, able to provide training and resource support to practitioners. I chaired the Scottish Consultation Group and we proposed that this function should be taken on in Scotland by SCEC rather than setting up a separate agency. From the mid-eighties, however, there seemed to be a strong reluctance at SCEC to include community development within its remit. Its focus was limited to youth issues and adult basic education - both important, but neglecting support for community capacity building. After the departure of Ralph Wilson it seemed to have become a rather cautious agency avoiding, in my view, what community education and development should be about, i.e. not merely supporting learning but also social action and in particular focussing upon helping disadvantaged individuals and communities. It was for this reason that the Scottish Community Development Centre was established by CDF and Glasgow University to fill that gap. I served for a while as a Board member.

My main role at CDF, however, was that of European and Public Affairs Director and it was wearing this hat that I became closely involved with the Council of Europe and the publication of Europe’s first *Resolution on Community Development* in 1989, attending the debate at the European Parliament with Ron Young. The definition adopted by the Council of Europe came from Scotland and was of community education. These were heady times with the fall of the Berlin Wall and opportunities for working with community educators across both western and eastern Europe. I worked closely with the Council of Europe, European Commission and the OECD to profile community education and development, publishing reports with them. I joined the board of the International Association for Community Development and was later instrumental in moving its HQ to Scotland as its Secretary General. I was a strong proponent of practitioners and others who support community education and development having national and international associations and had in the early eighties chaired the Scottish Association of Community Workers and was a founder member of the UK’s Standing Conference for Community Development.

In 1993 I was appointed Chief Executive of SCEC. During my time there we radically reorganised the agency, adding a community development team to those for adult

education and youth issues work, and focussed much more upon issues of disadvantage. We built upon SCEC's longstanding commitment to pan-European work led by Deputy Director Marc Liddle, by opening an office in Brussels, as the hub for what would become a Europe-wide network of *Eurodesk* information centres. We enhanced the work of CeVe and played a leading role in UK-wide partnerships, including establishing PAULO, the UK training standards body (NTO) for community learning and development (named after Paulo Freire). I served as its first chair.

We greatly increased our support for practitioners and trainers, publishing three academic refereed journals plus CONCEPT and a regular magazine supplement in the Daily Record (Scotland's largest selling popular newspaper) as well as web-based materials and other practical resources. We ran CPD training programmes and conferences, including co-ordinating the *European Year of Lifelong Learning* in Scotland and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Youth Forum, with participants meeting Nelson Mandela. Other work of significance included developing the Scottish Youth Parliament and programmes around drugs, health, the environment, crime, citizenship education and other issues and establishing national forums, one of which became the Scottish Community Development Alliance. We worked closely with SCET (Scottish Council for Educational Technology) where I was appointed chair of the Scottish National Grid for Community Learning Committee, continuing my interest in harnessing the new media for community education and development - one product of this being the on-line Community Channel.

1997 had seen the return of a Labour Government after 18 years. I remember with impish joy when I presented to the Board Labour's new democratic socialist Clause 4 as the basis for our new policy and practice agenda! Sadly for the next two years there was stasis with regard to almost any new public policy initiatives, as the Government in Scotland focussed upon establishing the new Scottish Parliament. In contrast, in England David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education, was forging ahead with work around citizenship education and community learning. I took the initiative with COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) in producing a report on the future for community education, focussing upon the promotion of social inclusion, lifelong learning and active citizenship.

This in turn influenced the 1998 Scottish Office's Osler Committee on community education, of which I was a member. In contrast to the highly consultative COSLA review, Osler pronounced but hardly consulted. Its most ambiguous pronouncement being that community education was an approach and not also a profession, something I said publicly was confusing. The committee would also not support my arguments for a legislative base for community education. Osler did however recommend yet another professional Training Review! The Scottish Office officials

then decided in their wisdom that the field would henceforth be called community learning and that SCEC would be called Community Learning Scotland. On neither of these matters was there any consultation or discussion with the field.

These were, I have to say, mixed times. The new Scottish Labour/Liberal Coalition Government did introduce new Ministries – for Lifelong Learning, Young People and for Communities - for which we had long campaigned. But lobbied hard by SCVO (Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations), they also placed SCEC at the top of the bonfire of the quangos. In my view, this was populist public policy vandalism just at the time when, with the launch of PAULO, the integrated Scottish approach to community education and development was getting traction across the UK. We were required to break the agency up, transferring most of our work to four new or existing voluntary sector development agencies, with a tiny rump remaining to work on policy advice and to run CeVe within a short-lived Executive Agency called Communities Scotland. The national development agency for community education was abolished, coincidentally in the year Sir Kenneth Alexander died. Things looked bleak with inexperienced Ministers and centrifugal ministries dismantling the vision of a more holistic service. For my own part, I transferred into government as the first Head of Community Learning and Development, frankly to try to limit the damage.

It is at this point that I should make some reference to why the term community learning and development was finally adopted in Scotland. As I have implied, I was strongly against the dropping of the community education brand. It had taken 25 years post Alexander to build up our profile. It was a strong and respected brand and did what it said on the tin. It was within the third national Training Review, this time chaired by Fraser Patrick, that we had some discussion about the new term 'community learning'. I was a longstanding proponent of bringing together the community education and community development worlds and through PAULO had convinced the community development field to come under that NTO and not the one for social care. So as a result of horse trading with Fraser we agreed that we should use the term 'community learning and development', the term PAULO used, to forge together the broad coalition of community-based informal education professions – youth work, community work, adult education, development education - as a single employment sector for the UK.

Whilst Head of Community Learning and Development, I had some influence over profiling its contribution across the new Government's policies on social inclusion, lifelong learning, community regeneration, community planning, land reform and access, rural and health policies and over the recognition of community learning and development as one of the four pillars of the soon to be formed Lifelong Learning UK Sector Skills Council, later abolished by the UK Conservative/Liberal Coalition Government in 2011. I was the main author of the Scottish Government's policy statements on the future of community learning and development and on its response

to the Training Review *Empowered to Practice*. This, amongst other things, called for CeVe to be given additional responsibilities and to become an independent Standards Council for Community Learning and Development. Perhaps predictably, it was several years and a further review of training, this time chaired by Ted Millburn, before that was eventually established. Disappointed at the lack of drive and support amongst the politicians, many of whom had come from our field and were now Ministers, I departed in 2003 to become CEO of the Carnegie UK Trust.

Carnegie UK had independent funds, far more than SCEC. But much of its assets were spent (on building libraries) and its grants scheme paled into insignificance compared with the new player on the block, the Lottery. It did however have huge recognition capital as the most iconic name in Scottish philanthropy. So in 2004 I advised trustees that we should become more akin to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in England. Scotland, I had long felt, needed a JRF, a progressive Scottish-based foundation 'speaking truth to power' that would fund independent Commissions of Inquiry, research and action-research, as well as supporting national and international communities of practice. In my five years with the Trust, as well as seeing the building of a new eco-designed HQ to replace the dental surgery atmosphere of its former off-putting offices, we supported a number of initiatives which I believed would strengthen community learning and development in Scotland, the UK and beyond.

We established two Commissions of Inquiry, the first into sustainable rural communities and the second into the future for civil society and democracy; we ran an extensive programme on youth empowerment, leading to the creation of *Participation Works*, the national resource centre supporting young people's participation; we funded over 50 community-based action research projects, over 100 local youth and community projects and the networking of communities of practice, including the International Association for Community Development and work around the possible impact of climate change upon vulnerable communities; we started to develop a significant publications programme; and created a partnership with the UK and Scottish governments and the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) to establish the first university-based research centres in the UK on philanthropy and charitable giving, a key objective being to unlock and target funding more effectively for progressive social change. Unsurprisingly, I also took the Trust international, forging its first European and American foundation partnerships.

Indeed, I left Carnegie in 2008 to become the CEO of an international foundation based in America but, sadly, for family reasons was unable to take up the job. So I returned to adult education, becoming Director of an international college inspired by EF Schumacher, the author of *Small is Beautiful*. Schumacher College is a remarkable place. It is a residential centre somewhat like Newbattle Abbey, running post-graduate and short course programmes around community, social, economic, farming, ecology

and environmental themes, with a strong sustainable and participative development underpinning. Its community learning and development approach is rooted in Schumacher's notion of 'whole person learning', i.e. where education touches your head, hands and heart.

With several hundred social and environmental activists, corporate social and environmental responsibility staff from the business sector and community educators in any one year coming from across the world, it is an immensely rich learning environment, as well as a place for recharging the batteries. In my period there we expanded the college, introduced more practical certificates and degrees and extended access for lower income students through cheaper courses and open learning. I retired in 2012.

It's been an interesting career, with never a bored but many frustrating moments. I've met some wonderful colleagues and many, many inspiring individuals and communities. Ken Alexander, whom I first met in 1975 and who kindly wrote the Foreword to my book *The Making of an Empowering Profession*, was clearly a visionary and deeply committed to widening access as well as enhancing the quality of learning and development support for disadvantaged communities. Individual politicians have been positive drivers of progressive change, whilst others who should have known better have knocked things into the long grass of endless reviews.

For nearly three decades with the support of organisations like SCEC, PAULO, the Lifelong Learning UK Sector Skills Council and now the Standards Council, community learning and development practitioners in Scotland have developed a sense of coherence and confidence as a recognised and respected sector of employment. According to the LLUK's last labour market report in 2010, some 60,000 work in this field across Scotland in one role or another, full- or part-time. But three of those support bodies now no longer exist and the Standards Council looks to me to be seriously under-funded for the tasks required. New development agencies have, of course, emerged, supporting different aspects of community learning and development - SCDC, Young Scot, Youth Link, and Scotland's Learning Partnership, for example - and they are doing some really excellent work. Paradoxically, the scenery of support since devolution now looks much more like England.

There has been a considerable growth of staff across Scotland supporting community learning and development over this period, although government cuts of late are biting deep. They have a myriad of job titles and far more are now employed in the voluntary sector. But too many remain untrained and unsupported in terms of their continuing professional development. It is here that I welcome the Standards Council's push for higher quality standards and this is why I have long supported open learning, work-based as well as FE and university-based professional training to scale-up access to training opportunities. On this latter point, however, I would say

that the graduate community learning and development professional training degrees run by the universities in Scotland have become over-theoretical. We need intelligent, critically reflective practitioners with an understanding of the structural causes and effects of inequality, but also the ethical passion and a strong skills toolkit to do something about tackling it. Practical skills training is vital. The Standards Council should not validate such courses unless they can demonstrate this.

The community land movement is just one example of where people have made real gains in Scotland, redistributing power and resources. Local communities, particularly those that are disadvantaged and facing day-to-day social, economic and environmental problems, let alone the need to be resilient to deal with future shocks such as climate change or long-term recession, need the best expertise and the most skilled community educators we can provide, and with specialist areas of technical expertise or, at the very least, the nous of how to get it. And it is here that the Standards Council needs also to influence the training and practice of other professionals from architects and health workers to farmers and artists, to sustain high quality community learning and development.