

Does Community Learning and Development Have a Role in the Scottish Referendum – Yes Or No?

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When I mentioned recently to a friend, a retired teacher, that I was helping to organise public seminars on the Scottish independence referendum she replied, "I'm struggling to see why you would be asked to organise such events....or have you got a new job?"

I don't think that her response is entirely due to ignorance of the role of Community Learning and Development (CLD) work but, rather sadly, due to the fact that too many CLD workers seem to have steered clear of any political work in recent years.

Anecdotal evidence, from speaking to colleagues in Edinburgh and some other parts of Scotland, seems to indicate that some CLD workers don't feel confident about delivering provision around the referendum, maybe from a mistaken belief on their part, or on the part of their managers and/or employers, that political work is 'not allowed.'

I believe that politics should be at the heart of what we do and that the forthcoming referendum presents us with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to engage the folk we work with in dialogue and debate around the broad topics of democracy, governance and politics.

Too often, people equate politics with party politics and assume that by addressing politics in our work we will be advocating support for this party or that or, in the case of the referendum, for a Yes or No vote, which would be at odds with our professional role. My understanding of political work in a CLD context is that it's about enabling people to understand the historical and current, local, national and international political context, how governance and government work, how these affect their everyday lives, helping them to find the information and tools with which to analyse

and critique all of that, and to take appropriate action to change it. (On the understanding that you'd be hard put to find anyone who thinks everything is perfect as it is.)

Prior to an election, this might involve looking at the manifestos of the various parties¹ or, in the case of the referendum, exploring the claims and counter claims of the two campaigns and, more importantly, helping people to explore and develop their own vision of a better Scotland to enable them to make a more informed choice about which option might be best placed to deliver it.

All of this is legitimate CLD work. It was gratifying that CLD managers in Edinburgh agreed last year that CLD workers' objectives should include work around the referendum. There has certainly been a lot of 'referendum work' going on in the capital since, including work targeted at young people, women, adult literacies groups and ESOL learners. In addition, there have been adult education courses, seminars, cross-generational work and staff training events for youth workers.

Talk Scotland is a Workers' Educational Initiative to bring together workers from various sectors carrying out work in this area. A wide range of resources to support such work have been made available on-line.²

However, there are still workers who, as mentioned above, are not confident about their role and steer clear of this work.

When I was a Community Education student at Moray House in the early 1990s, the campaign for a Scottish Parliament/Assembly was in full swing³, and Community Education Workers (as we were called then) were organising activities to ensure that the groups they worked with understood the issues behind the campaign, not least the

¹ I well remember such a session at the Adult Learning Project's Democracy Group in the 1990s. We'd been looking at the manifestos of a different party each week. At the end of the Conservative session, one woman shouted out, 'I thought I was an anarchist and I'm a bloody Tory!'

² <http://www.upskilling.org.uk/home/talk-scotland-materials/resources>

³ Somewhere in the grounds of Moray House campus in Edinburgh is a time capsule in which are various posters, meeting minutes and notes about the campaign.

'democratic deficit,' Scotland consistently being governed by a party for which we hadn't voted. As Professor Lindsay Paterson (2000) pointed out, 'The unsung backbone of the entire twenty-year campaign for a Scottish Parliament has been Scotland's network of community educators'. Even then though, despite the campaign itself being cross-party, many workers avoided getting involved in any work around the subject, some for fear of being labelled SNP supporters. There are, of course, parallels with the current context.

My final year placement was at Edinburgh's Adult Learning Project (ALP) where the Democracy Group had been exploring politics, citizenship, democracy and the democratic deficit since the unexpected return of a Tory government, under John Major, at the 1992 General Election. SNP and Labour supporters were almost at each other's throats, each blaming the other for 'splitting the opposition vote.' The workers at ALP realised that there was nowhere outwith party politics and university courses to learn about politics and democracy, so the ALP Democracy Group was tasked with investigating these subjects. The group continues to this day and, as I write, is organising a referendum hustings event.

The 1997 General Election saw a Labour government returned, the first for eighteen years, under Prime Minister Tony Blair. On the 11th September that year, a referendum was held in Scotland. The electorate was asked to put their cross against options on two ballot papers:

- I agree that there should be a Scottish Parliament,
- I do not agree that there should be a Scottish Parliament.

The second paper gave options on tax powers:

- I agree that a Scottish Parliament should have tax varying powers OR
- I do not agree that the Scottish Parliament should have tax varying powers.

After a turnout of more than 60%, the majority (74.3%) voted in favour of a Scottish parliament, with 63.5% also saying yes to tax-raising powers.

As the results came in, political party members sat in rows at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre (EICC) while the biggest party in Edinburgh that night, organised by the Scotland Forward campaign group⁴ was in St Bride's Community Centre. Rumour had it that the Scottish Office, lacking confidence in the result, had decided against a bar at the EICC and was afraid even to blow up a balloon ahead of the result, for fear of being left with egg on its face in front of the gathered journalists and cameras.

Meanwhile, at the community centre, hundreds raised a glass to the new Scottish Parliament as they were entertained by musicians, comedians, drama groups and other performers. The contrast between the two events was evidenced as the evening wore on when the media, and even some of the politicians, eventually abandoned the rather po-faced conference setting for the community centre's party celebrations.⁵

Edinburgh Active Citizenship Group

On 2nd March 1999 workers from Edinburgh and the Lothians, who were already involved in what could be termed 'active citizenship' work, were invited to a meeting by the Community Education Worker at Leith Academy. The aim was to share information about work that was going on around the new Scottish Parliament that was to reconvene in July that year, and to consider if and how such work could be co-ordinated.

Individuals and agencies were approaching this work from different angles and had been involved in broad political/active citizenship work for varying lengths of time, ranging from a few months to more than twenty years. In May 1997 and June 1998, Edinburgh's Community Education Service had held well-attended public seminars as part of the advertised Adult Education Programme, one on the forthcoming Scottish Parliament and the other on the impact of the parliament on local government.

⁴ Scotland Forward was a cross-party group which also included organisations such as the Scottish Trades Union Council, the Educational Institute of Scotland and the Equal Opportunities Commission.

⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdeSUloset8

In addition to ALP's Democracy Group, other active citizenship work in Edinburgh over that period had included a Women into Public Life course, the development of the Drylaw Neighbourhood Centre and the Adult Learners' Forum in Edinburgh (ALFiE).

For some workers, the imminent arrival of the Scottish Parliament had brought an urgency to the development of learning courses around the general topic of government and, specifically, on the implications of the new parliament for the lives of people in Scotland. For others, well-established courses on the broad topic were becoming over-subscribed and the demand for places was rising.

One of the outcomes of that meeting was that a group of those present agreed to take forward a plan for regular, free, public meetings around the broad topic of active citizenship.

Since then that group, under the name of the Edinburgh Active Citizenship Group (EACG) has run almost forty events and produced various active citizenship resources.⁶ The initial seminars were on the new Scottish Parliament - how the voting system works, the petitions system, how to respond to consultations, the role of the media, etc, but other topics covered include, globalization, war, anti-social behavior, prostitution, peak oil and poverty.

The purpose of the seminars have always been two-fold:

1. To create a space for learning and debating key issues by providing members of the public with an opportunity to find out about the seminar topic from speakers, e.g. academics, media commentators and politicians, to question them and put forward their own views.

⁶ Website: www.edinburghactivecitizens.wordpress.com Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Edinburghs-Active-Citizenship-Group/320919982709>

2. To present a seminar structured in such a way that everyone has an opportunity to speak. Too often such events involve an audience being spoken at for an hour and three quarters, then offered ten minutes at the end for those who are loudest and most confident to put forward their view. EACG seminars give more time for small group discussion and plenary sessions than for speakers. In addition, it is not unusual for participants who come along to be very knowledgeable about the subject so they are also able to share their expertise. Although this style of event is fairly common now, when the EACG was set up, it was the exception.

Over the years there have been occasional challenges to the events, from politicians who mistakenly believed that the group was taking a party political stance by questioning the status quo, and on one occasion by a participant who complained, "They made me listen to other people." In all cases, Edinburgh CLD managers backed the group's position and supported the work it does.

So what is holding back our colleagues who are avoiding the opportunity that the referendum offers to engage communities they work with in meaningful dialogue about the Scotland they want to live in?

Is it, as I suggest above, that they don't think they should be involved in this type of work or have no confidence in their managers to support them? Or is it that they don't feel they have the skills or tools to attempt it?

Despite CLD managers in Edinburgh last year giving staff a steer by agreeing a 'referendum work' objective, there is still confusion about how to go about it and about what the worker's role should be.

I believe there is a need for more staff training, not only on what kind of activities could be organised but also, from my experience, the need to have discussions about how to present, question and challenge the positions of both campaigns without being partisan or in danger of influencing individuals we work with. This is basic stuff that

we should all be capable of, whether in the context of an election or a referendum. That is not to say that it is simple, but that should not be a reason to avoid the work.

In my workplace we have talked about how to respond if a young learner (or anyone from the community you work with) asks how you will vote. You might say you haven't decided or that you're not allowed to say, but what if that person then sees you out leafletting or campaigning and shares that information with the group? Having such discussions helps workers, including volunteers, to have more confidence to respond appropriately should the need arise.

'I don't do politics,' or 'I'm not interested in politics,' are phrases that we might often come across but they are easily challenged, just by asking folk how they spend their time or what they are interested in, because everything is affected by politics: what your tax rate is, how many hours your employer can force you to work, what determines whether or not you're entitled to benefits, what television channels are licensed to transmit in your area, how much the TV licence costs, how much a prescription costs, how much VAT there is on the clothes you buy, how much your favourite tipple costs, and how old you have to be to buy it, etc.

I am not going to set out a list of possible activities that could be delivered on the referendum; the opportunities are endless to engage people in dialogue about what is good and not good about their lives, what would make things better, and how these things are influenced by policy and thus politics. From there it's a simple step to begin to look at the issues around the referendum. There is a wealth of information in newspapers, on television, TV, websites, blogs and on social media like Facebook and Twitter. Comparing how some of these media treat the same referendum news story and how it develops might be a good starting point.

Maybe the most important thing for workers to say is that no-one knows exactly what life would be like in an independent Scotland, just as no-one knows exactly what life would be like in Scotland after a No vote. No-one knows what governments would be in power in either case.

The future does not exist; we make it. The referendum count won't use a 'first past the post' system or an additional members system; every single vote will count and CLD workers have a role to play in helping people we work with to make an informed choice. This is the most exciting time I can remember for our profession in Scotland.

References

Paterson L, (2000) From a speech at the Workers Educational Association's 'Celebrating Learning' conference, 2000.