Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners

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> **Concept invited a range of practitioners to select a chapter from the Guide, and provide an introduction explaining its particular usefulness to practice.**

CHAPTER 1: THINKING POLITICALLY

*With an introduction by **Neil Saddington**, Senior Lifelong Learning & Employability Worker, Midlothian Council.*

When asked to write an introduction for one of the chapters in *Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practioners* it was the first chapter on 'Thinking Politically' that leapt out at me. Sometimes in the field of practice it can be easy to get caught up in having to react, often quickly, to the complex and contradictory forces that are at play within community education. Chapter One brought me back to key fundamental but political questions and issues in relation to Community Engagement that one should never lose sight of such as what is its purpose plus why and what is it funded for? As practitioners, it's important to take time to draw on theoretical ideas and concepts in order to make some kind of sense of the dynamics and tensions that can exist between policies, politics, power, the people we work with and their lived experience, plus our own values and stances as workers.

The 'contradictions of practice' diagram is the perfect tool to help us begin the process of trying to place ourselves in the midst of the competing demands and challenges we face within our work. As a literacies and numeracy development worker, my role is very much about educational engagement and how literacies work connects to everything and is not just about instrumental learning tasks. Literacies work also relates to how people and learners view the world and the complex nature of this. Learners' goals vary but are often linked to increasing confidence, building on existing experience and knowledge plus their own idea of how they want their life to be. In contrast, policy can very much focus on the supposed 'deficit' individual and the changes they need to make, rather than looking at the political system and any

failings it may have in terms of creating a more equal and fair society. An example of this is the current benefits sanction regime and the Universal credit system forcing people to go online to claim benefits and job search, and the problems this can cause for people. The diagram on the contradictions of practice and other resources within the Guide can help to broaden our understanding of the complexities and contradictions that are at play in the relationships between worker, policy agenda and the communities we work with.

The exercise which presents statements about the potential purposes of community engagement and the diverse nature of what it can mean in different contexts is also particularly useful in terms of highlighting the widely varying outcomes it can potentially have. For example, on one hand it could seem to be about working with the community or being involved in an educational process that is a response to local need, whilst on the other it can also be about developing employability skills and improving social mobility which may form part of a more top down agenda altogether.

That task leads nicely onto the final part of the Chapter which deals with Ideologies in context and how our work always relates to a bigger picture. At the moment, in the current political climate of austerity with cuts to health, welfare and public services, the dominant ideological worldview can be seen as one where the circumstances of an individual are viewed as much more their own responsibility, downplaying the state's role in helping those who are marginalised or less well off. This particular way of framing things will often neglect to examine other issues like inequality of opportunity, unlevel playing fields and systems that benefit the most well off. I thoroughly recommend you read and use this excellent practitioner's Guide; Chapter 1 on thinking politically, with its focus on contradictions of practice, the varied nature and potential outcomes of community engagement plus ideological contexts, is a fitting place to start.

Introduction

Community-based education is generally assumed to operate for the good of various kinds of communities, but it's not as straightforward as that. Thinking politically about community education means delving beneath the surface claims it makes for itself to ask questions about what it's really *for*. What is its purpose? This means looking at how it's funded, for what and why? Who is considered to be 'the community' and who is not? Who benefits and who loses out? How can communities operate within these circumstances to shift the balance of power in their favour? These are all questions that raise political issues.

The contradictions of practice

Community education work occurs at the interface between the state and civil society; at the point where representative and participatory democracy meet. This can cause tensions for practitioners when policy priorities appear to determine both how, and on what issues, practitioners can engage with communities. This sometimes contradictory position is represented below.

Demands of policy

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Community education practitioner

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Demands of communities

Practitioners are caught in the middle of having to manage these different and sometimes competing demands. Policy frameworks (local, national or international) can either enable or impede real democratic participation. At the same time, when policy is challenged by the democratic demands of communities, mutually beneficial change can occur.

This terrain could be described as an 'incubator for politics': the site in which grievances are generated and opposition organised; where local activists and politicians develop; where struggles for social justice grow and recede, and where inter-communal conflicts can erupt and be resolved.

Task: Bearing in mind the competing demands described above, consider the following statements and tick either 'agree' or 'disagree' for each statement. Do this individually, then in pairs or small groups, noting any areas of disagreement. Are any of these in tension with or contradiction to each other? How would you change or qualify any of the statements? How would you grade them in importance to you?

Community education is about ….

…. working with the community   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. community engagement   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. being involved in an educational process   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. solving local problems   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. helping people do more for themselves   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. community participation   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. community empowerment   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. social change   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. creating access to resources   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. responding to local needs   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. developing employability skills   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. responding to policy   AGREE/DISAGREE

…. improving social mobility   AGREE/DISAGREE

Ideologies in context

Community education is always contextual: it happens in particular places at particular times, in particular circumstances. That means it has to be related to the bigger picture, and especially to ideologies that may be at work at any given time.

Any short or single-sentence definition of ideology is impossible, but there are some features all ideologies have:

- A *worldview*, including what constitutes human nature, the purpose of political activity and the nature of economic activity
- A *critique* of existing socio-economic systems
- A *vision* of the future – the ideal society which its followers should strive to achieve
- A *strategy* and set of methods which should be used to achieve the ideal society.

Ideological framing involves shaping the terms of political and social debate by defining the problem, the causes and the solutions. Different stories (or narratives) can be told about the same set of facts ie What is the problem? Who is to blame? How can positive change be effected? All modern ideologies also have a view about the role of the individual, the state, the market, the family.

Ideologies create different stories (or narratives) which can be told about the same set of facts, or emphasise a different set of facts which are deemed more significant. Ideologies can also lead to 'blind spots': things that are left out of the picture because they are assumed to be beyond question. For example, hostile attacks on people in receipt of public welfare benefits, commonly but not exclusively linked to versions of Neoliberalism and Conservatism, will rarely point to the way in which corporate and fiscal welfare policies provide much greater benefits for the well off. These different types of state support are effectively excluded from public debate and decision-making. Similarly, different ways of ideologically framing economic migration and refugees – both negative and positive – have an influence on policy responses.

Task: In small groups discuss what you consider to be the relevant contextual features that shape what practitioners do with local individuals or groups now? These can be at a local micro level (eg. High incidence of drug-use, benefits claimants or refugees; availability of communal facilities; funding priorities) or national, global macro level (eg. Particular policies; political parties; key political

events; issues such as climate change or inequality; international relations which produce local consequences; ideological frameworks). List these on flip charts and discuss what has been raised.

__Task:__ Individually, and then in small groups, give a score of 1-5 to each in terms of how they __actually__ influence your work (1 being most significant). Then do the same task in terms of what you think __should__ influence your work. Discuss any differences between your scores.

__Task :__ Taking into account your discussions from the above tasks, consider your response to the following case study on extending local political participation:
You are working with a local community group who are keen to discuss the current 'extending local democracy' initiative, and to assess the extent to which the model offers 'meaningful' participation. In preparation for the session, you think that drawing up a number of key questions, or key themes, would provide a useful framework for a critical discussion that takes context and competing ideological interests into account. What would your key questions or themes be?

Available at http://journals.ed.ac.uk/ojs-images/concept/community-engagement.pdf