Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners

Jim Crowther and Mae Shaw

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

CHAPTER 4: MAKING EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

*With an introduction by **Mel Aitken**, Family Support worker with Barnardo's Scotland*

As practitioners, one of the seminal aspects of our work is establishing that all important relationship with those around us. It is the ubiquitous concept that facilitates meaningful work and, whether figuratively or literally, ensures the door is not shut in our face. In my opinion, it is the commitment and value placed on this relationship that unifies and under- writes all aspects of the community education field and in my role as a Family Support Worker cannot be down played. In this chapter, Jim Crowther and Mae Shaw highlight this dynamic, its tensions and the necessity for this relationship to be one of educational purpose.

When reading this chapter, the section on personal agency really resonated with me. So often we assume the motivation for involvement in a service or group is morally sound; that the person engaging feels passionate about social change or motivated to improve something personal to their lives. Unfortunately, for many practitioners, including myself, the quadrant that best typifies involvement is the idea of 'passive disengagement' where individuals are disempowered or even coerced into involvement. This then changes the nature of the work, as these individuals' agency is not valued and their capacity is from the outset seen as lacking. This throws up an interesting dynamic for professionals who are working within a fraught context, and highlights the need to critically evaluate the parameters of engagement and the meaning behind it. As the authors highlight, agency is neither fixed nor static. Understanding, and in some cases problematizing, this position can help facilitate

space within the work to establish *true* educational engagement that recognises the role of power.

Another key element of the chapter is its clarity about the need to define educational purpose. This is a staunch reminder to me as I navigate the everyday reality of working with individuals and families who are often living in crisis. In this thinly stretched climate it is easy for your role to become one of practical assistance and 'fire-fighting' where you attempt to be 'all things to all people'. Or alternatively, feel lost about where to start, continue or end. The authors outline the importance of breaking down the work into educational purposes, aims and objectives. In doing so, it not only gives the worker direction and reassurance, but it protects them from becoming a puppet of policy, or complicit in top-down agendas. This section also highlights the need for these aims to be fluid and easily reviewed and adapted, as rarely does everything go perfectly to plan. Similarly, the objectives set must be sensitive to the needs, abilities and experiences of the individual or group involved and be able to grow as they do.

Although outcomes can often be viewed as the more tedious part of the job, this chapter highlights their importance. Evaluating progress, achievements and stumbling blocks is the only way the work can continue to grow, develop and find meaning. It can also be a vital part of reinforcing the importance of the service for those who fund it! Being reflexive and reviewing the relevance of the purpose, aims and objectives of a project not only justifies its existence but reinforces its worth. In my role, I use the set 'outcomes pro-forma' as a learning tool for the young people and families I work with to derive their own meaning. It provides the space to reflect on their lives, highlight strengths and pinpoint areas needing more focus. This then 'ticks the box' of providing evidence but, more meaningfully, sets the course of the work to be inclusive of needs as identified by people themselves.

Finally, the chapter emphasises the resources needed for good educational work and the forms these can take. Crowther and Shaw encapsulate the way these resources can bring depth and meaning – from analysis of the statistical, historical and ideological to

the incorporation of experience and personal narrative. As practitioners, it is vital that we hold these ideas as part of a metaphorical 'toolkit' where, through structured activities, creative projects and informal games, discussion can be stimulated and meaning fostered.

I greatly enjoyed this chapter and the wider publication. One of the most unsettling and arduous tasks for a professional is to challenge their own practice but I feel this guide gives practitioners a safe space to do this. It has the force to both reassure and revitalise. In testing times, it is easy to become apathetic agents of policy or funding, but there is real power in holding on to our educational role, making meaningful relationships and having the grim determination to keep it that way.

Introduction

In thinking about educational relationships, it may be useful to consider educational engagement as a continuum. In other words, educational work can start from what people may want or need to *know*, but it can also start from what people may want to *do*. Similarly, personal development and collective action are obviously interconnected in the sense that taking collective action often leads to personal development, whilst personal change (or the limitations of it) can light the spark for acting collectively.

Figure 1 below locates four versions of personal agency (ie capacity to act) which may help to think about how educational relationships can be built.

Recognising the necessity for collective change	Taking collective action
Recognising the necessity for personal change	Feeling personally disengaged or passive

Task: Using this figure, locate your existing educational relationships with individuals and groups, and their origins. Chart any movement back or forth between the quadrants. Is there anything missing from the figure? Consider further opportunities for collective learning and/or action.

To conceive of education as a linear process that moves from the individual to the collective, as is sometimes assumed, may limit our view and obscure the variety of motivations and impulses that can generate interest:

- In some instances the necessity for collective change may be obvious at a political level, whilst the personal implications are less so.
- Becoming involved in collective campaigns that are not ultimately 'successful' may generate disillusionment and inaction.
- Policy initiatives targeted at 'personal disengagement or passivity' that advocate behavioural change or control (eg employability, or healthy eating) can potentially provide the impetus, legitimacy and resources for educational work with broader objectives.
- Taking control of some personal aspects of life can be sufficient to significantly change some people's circumstances for the better and they retreat from community activity temporarily or altogether.
- Recognition that personal change will not be enough to make the structural changes required may be frustrated in the absence of wider opportunities for collective action.

What is important is that all of these stages should be considered as legitimate starting points for educational practitioners.

Establishing educational purposes, aims and objectives

Why? Some good reasons:

- If you do not set your own aims, purposes and objectives, they will be set for you by the priorities of policy and/or management systems;
- They are linked to how problems are defined or perceived;
- They provide a measure of personal and public accountability for your actions;
- They encourage a systematic approach to being competent, committed and creative.

Starting from principles: some distinctions

Educational purposes: A statement of principles to enable you to answer the following questions: What is educational engagement in this context *for*? What purpose does it, or should it, fulfil? Why does this project exist?

The following list may help you to think about educational work as a spectrum, and to prioritise different dimensions at different stages. Some purposes may come to the fore at particular times. Try to relate these purposes to concrete situations so that they do not become 'professed virtues' at odds with real practice.

- Personal development
- Skills development
- Political development
- Responding to policy initiatives
- Giving voice to marginalised groups
- Collectivising experience
- Increasing independence/autonomy
- Building solidarity within and between groups
- Other?

Task: Rank these purposes in terms of importance to your work now: from 1-5 where 1 is low and 5 is high This process may help you to be more explicit about what you are trying to do, and to build arguments about the importance of particular kinds of purpose.

Educational aims: A broad statement of what you are trying to achieve. There can be more than one (these may differ according to the priorities of the employing agency). In some cases, educational aims may be in contention. For example, where the stated aim of the agency or relevant policy is to alter the behaviour of communities so that they take more personal responsibility for matters which are largely or completely beyond their control, then developing a critical educational curriculum may require a more creative and strategic approach.

Some examples of educational aims:

- Reduced powerlessness of particular groups
- Increased critical understanding of the current policy context and how it affects particular groups.
- Increased capacity for analysis of the potential for different kinds of change in particular contexts.
- Increased understanding of the ways and means of power.
- Increased capacity in relating personal experience to public issues and vice versa

Task: What are the broad aims which inform your work? Are there competing aims? How can these be reconciled or negotiated? Try to produce a list of aims which are both principled and realistic.

Educational objectives: These need to be more specific and detailed if they are to be helpful in practice. They will involve specific statements of what you want a particular piece of work to achieve in a specific period, related to overall purposes and aims. You will also need to build in an evaluation system ie how can you test whether

you are meeting your objectives? This requires some creative thinking, rather than relying simply on data, or managerial outcomes.

Example objective:

Over the next six months to increase the knowledge of 12 people in a women's health group about health inequalities in Scotland (or elsewhere) and to develop skills in identifying issues which affect them.

Assessing what is realistically achievable, taking into account a range of factors:

- Make up of the group
- Personal circumstances of members
- Relevant experience of members
- Time available to members
- Reasons for attending
- Level of interest
- Your relationship with them

There may be some tensions here in relation to what different people want to do, or are in a position to do, along with personalities who may be more or less dominant. There may also be competing agendas at play that will need to be negotiated. This will take honest and open discussion, but may also need some planned intervention by the practitioner to encourage more confident members to hang back at times, whilst encouraging and enabling those less confident to express themselves.

Indicators of success: How will you know you are achieving your objectives?
This is where you can test whether your objectives are clear and realistic. They may need to be revised in light of your assessment of what is reasonable for a specific group of people, or as things change and people leave or join the group, or if something unexpected happens. Some flexibility is always necessary.

Sample indicators:

Group or members of group display some or all of the following characteristics:

- Increased knowledge demonstrated through discussion with each other and elsewhere.
- The ability to question media and political representations of policy and of their own experience individually or in groups.
- The ability to make connections with wider political and economic developments individually or in group settings.
- The capacity to challenge power holders at different levels on a range of issues.
- The willingness to express informed opinions, make arguments and convey these to others.
- The willingness to make connections with other similar groups or campaigns.

Educational Resources: What will you bring to the process?

You will need to think about potential resources, both external and internal, which can be drawn upon to address your objectives.

For example:

Focus	Resources
Knowledge of statistics:	Policy documents, commentaries, newspapers, online sources, guest speakers, meeting other similar groups, contact with relevant campaigns.
Recognising historical patterns of change:	Time-line of significant policy/political changes and major events; analysis of change factors and agents; intergenerational debate; critical commentaries.
Ideological analysis:	Alternative accounts from political commenters or intellectual allies.

Personal experience: Personal stories, case studies and comparisons; campaign materials; creative explorations.

Some important distinctions:

There are different kinds of objectives that should not get muddled up:

Strategic objectives: related to policy, and appropriate for funding purposes and ensuring space is retained for setting educational objectives – developed by practitioner.

Educational objectives: related to critical engagement with policy and appropriate to educational purposes – developed by practitioner.

Learning objectives: related to what participants want to learn/explore/research and appropriate to personal, social and or political purposes – developed through dialogue and negotiation between group and practitioner

You may have to be strategic in setting objectives for funding purposes or to conform to policy frameworks, but these kinds of objectives on their own are not useful to guide educational work. Similarly, what participants want to learn may be different to what the practitioner thinks they might want to learn if they knew more about it, or had the choice. One particularly important reason for making these distinctions is so that where practitioners become compromised by their position, communities can retain some degree of autonomy.

There are also obvious limits to simply asking people what they want as the basis for educational programmes. For one thing, they may respond on the basis of what they think might be available or expected rather than make demands; on the other hand, they may be completely unrealistic about what can be achieved without a good working knowledge of the wider policy context and the political options available. Practitioners need to be prepared to make skilled and informed judgements about how to draw on and extend the range of local knowledge.

Task: *Try to identify examples of strategic objectives, educational objectives and learning objectives in your own work, and the connections between them.*

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