

## Review

### **Shaping the Future: A New Radical Learning Network**

**University of Glasgow**

**9 November 2017**

On Thursday 9th November 2017 I travelled through to the University of Glasgow for the *Shaping The Future: A New Radical Learning Network* launch and networking event. Hosted by Dave Beck, Lecturer in Community Development, and with a 3-hour running time, the event was pitched as ‘an opportunity to decide what we want to be as a network, what we can do together, and the ways we can get involved’. This article is a summary of the proceedings, along with a handful of my own reflections.

With around 55 people in attendance (the majority coming from the immediate area), proceedings commenced with Dave welcoming attendees as ‘the Radical Learning Network’ – suggesting all those in attendance were themselves ‘the network’. He went on to set out a vision of the Network engaging ‘a group of practitioners, activists, students, and academics [with] support from both the University of Glasgow, and the *Radical Community Work Journal* (of which he is co-editor). He spoke of the urgent need for activity on the community development front, and to prioritise this over what he described as ‘talking shops’ (characterised as university graduates and community practitioners sitting together at catered events, talking only to each other about ‘best practice’ and the difference they could make if only they had the resources). Conceived through an ambition to reduce the isolation many practitioners experience in the field, the Radical Learning Network seeks to offer ‘intellectual, emotional, and practical support to its members’.

The introduction was exciting and engaging, with talk of professional development workshops, study tours, online engagement, academic journal articles, and of ‘recapturing the radical heart of community development’ – each action designed to aid and to inform professional practice, and to encourage self-reflection. Noting

what is perhaps a defining characteristic of our field, an audience member joked about the financing of the network, but this was teased off as ‘a problem for later’. It is admirable that in just 4 weeks, the Radical Learning Network had attracted 416 interested participants. This was an impressive feat given Dave’s view that community-driven initiatives are somewhat ‘counter cultural’ in modern society, with ideas sourced from communities often dismissed in favour of ‘top-down’ pre-prescribed projects designed by various levels of government which for the most part result in short-term change (at best) and run their course without any genuine lasting social impact.

Divided up into small groups, attendees entered into facilitated discussion on topics such as ‘Why we need the Radical Learning Network’, ‘What would the Radical Learning Network do?’, and ‘Why do we need a Radical Learning Network at this point in history?’ Early answers resembled values most organisations would proclaim: inclusiveness, open to all, a forum for sharing best practice, an online network, professional conferences etc. Nothing that would set it apart from the pre-existing networks already in place, e.g. the Community Learning and Development Standards Council (CLDSC) who list ‘inclusion’, ‘empowerment’, and ‘working collaboratively’ as their values, and the Scottish Community Development Network (SCDN) who cite ‘hav[ing] a strong, collective, grassroots voice within Community Development across Scotland’ and being ‘part of a strong, dynamic forum to share experiences, exchange information and debate practice and policy issues’ amongst the benefits practitioners will gain through membership.

The final session sought to rectify this. Pitches were made for concrete and actionable proposals: practitioner Facebook groups (at least two exist already, i.e. Scottish Jobs in Community Learning & Development and the Discussion Forum for Community Educators, which I created during my undergraduate Community Education studies); a ‘services map’ akin to Google Maps which would locate community hubs or organisations engaged in ‘radical community practice’; regular ‘educationals’ such as those offered by the Scottish Socialist Party. Each already exists in some form and in some areas although seemingly no single organisation offers each of them at the level

or in the contexts that would-be members of the Radical Learning Network desire. YouTube tutorials which would help decode the academic language that surrounds policy and legislation, offering digital engagement (in contrast to my trip from Edinburgh to Glasgow which involved almost 4 laborious hours of travel).

My own pitch proposed establishing a grant or sponsorship fund (similar to the Educational Grants offered to its members by Unite the Union or the University of Edinburgh's Discretionary Fund) which could help adult learners or young people with their child care expenses, academic texts, or bus passes (an idea inspired by North Edinburgh Arts-based charity Tomorrow's People) as a way to encourage enrolment in evening, college, or university classes. This could tie into another attendee's suggestion of membership fees. Fundamental and perhaps of foremost importance was the need to establish a set of guiding principles which the Radical Learning Network and its members would adhere to; radical values that might be at home in the anti-war movements or the transnational Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25).

The event closed fairly abruptly. With time quickly running out for the 3-hour room booking, attendees were encouraged to sign up to a mailing list, enabling Dave and the team of facilitators involved on the night to advise of future steps. If any readers are interested in learning more about the Radical Learning Network contact [Dave.Beck@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Dave.Beck@glasgow.ac.uk) or on Twitter at [@beckglasgow](https://twitter.com/beckglasgow).

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