

## Community Engagement: What's the Problem?

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Today's seminar is both a launch of the *Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners* and an opportunity to consider the problematic nature of community engagement in practice.

It is not an information or motivational day on how to do community engagement; nor a decision-making or strategy-forming forum, though it may provoke some follow up activity. Neither is it representative of any particular interests or arguments.

It is intended as a forum for questioning, critique and the expression of constructive skepticism; a chance for people to come together in what we hope will be a stimulating and convivial atmosphere; an opportunity to meet friends, old and new, and allies – to feel refreshed and renewed.

Most of all, it is a rare open space for talking, listening and *thinking*.

Thinking seems to be a very under-rated activity these days. It is almost discouraged as old-fashioned, stuck-in-the-mud and boring. An advertisement I saw repeatedly on a trip to Dublin recently, said 'Stop thinking; start dreaming', as if the two were mutually exclusive. To me, this expresses something of the predicament we are in regarding community engagement. This banal catchphrase may be closer to home than we would like to think. Some of the language and the ideas which converge around policy and practice actively discourage sensible thought or legitimate questioning. You will have your own favourites, but one of mine came recently from information for a community engagement forum in London, where the opening

address was to be given by a speaker from ‘Relationship Development Corporate, Future Cities Catapult’. Orwell must be turning in his grave!

And before we get too smug, we can all identify similar fantasies from our own worlds of practice: Better Outcomes Leaner Delivery (BOLD): how’s that supposed to enthuse anybody – particularly when it’s often thinly disguised as ‘cuts’? Writing in the current *Scottish Review*, the political commentator Gerry Hassan expresses the problem well when he says that ‘politics and public life as *pretence* seems to be good enough’. And of course nobody is fooled. The management speak documents pouring out of government think tanks, universities, local authorities and professional bodies fool no one – and still they come, like zombies that keep going long after any recognisable life remains.

In fact sometimes community education work in general feels like what one writer calls ‘the performance of fantasy’: outputs, destinations and the rest. According to most people I speak to these days, maintaining that fantasy takes up far too much valuable time that could be spent *actually* engaging with people. So Hassan raises some very important questions which are highly relevant to community engagement strategies when he asks:

Who do we trust to speak to us, to listen and understand our problems? To offer a guide that points in a direction and takes us there at a speed and consistency that respects anxieties and doubts, and the need to build broad coalitions of support?

We try to address some of these questions in the critical guide to community engagement. The opening chapter is entitled ‘Thinking politically’ which means ‘delving beneath the surface claims community engagement makes for itself to ask questions about what it’s really *for*. What is its purpose? Who is regarded as the community and who is not? Who benefits and who loses out? Engagement on whose terms and with what degree of power? Most importantly perhaps, how can communities operate within contemporary circumstances to shift the balance of power in their favour? Critical thinking is not just a technique, but also a state of mind.

How we define what is the problem (the sub-title of today's seminar) inevitably determines the solution. In Chapter 6 'Defining the problem – framing the solution' we explore how what are presented as 'problems' come to be accepted without question. Framing problems in particular ways means that some factors which might be highly relevant are deliberately left out of the picture. For example, who could be against community engagement? But we should surely also ask why it has become so popular now, what is seen to be the problem it addresses, and what is left out of the frame? Is community engagement a managerial procedure, framed around policy priorities alone, or is it a genuine democratic process, which allows for 'anxieties and doubts', and maybe even dissent.

No policy happens in a vacuum, but in a wider economic, ideological and political context – and of course it has real consequences in real situations. There's one thing that may be right about that Irish injunction to 'start dreaming' though. Raymond Williams (1989, 118) once remarked that "to be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing". Our democratic imagination needs to be activated so we can dream more; dream better; imagine beyond the limited frames of reference we are offered in much public life; so that we can imagine alternatives or even 'another world'.

In practical terms, if people cannot imagine *real* democratic engagement, then they are unlikely to fight for it. Making critical and creative connections in educational work with communities – another chapter in the critical guide – might help to enliven people's innate capacity to express themselves – to light the fuse of imagination. If we think about the social advances of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries alone, we must realize that these would not have happened without the sustained efforts of those who were themselves marginalized and discriminated against: disabled people, women, LGBTQ, black people. Some of the organisations represented here today are the direct consequence of those struggles. These are continuing struggles – to sustain what has been gained and is always in danger of being withdrawn.

That should be the real lesson, and inspiration, for community engagement. Democracy is rarely handed down, but rather has to be struggled *for* and over. This realization alone should give cause for questioning what community engagement might or could mean. If we need a slogan which expresses the need and desire to expand real democratic spaces, it might be ‘we need hope, not hype’.

Finally, it has been said that people cannot think *for* themselves if they think *by* themselves. Today, let’s try to think together, through discussion, argument, even disagreement.

Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners is available at <http://journals.ed.ac.uk/ojs-images/concept/community-engagement.pdf>