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Critical Reflection and Community Education Values

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Introduction

While Reflective Practice is widely regarded as an essential, but orthodox, part of Community Education, Critical Reflection is a more radical, transformative process that questions fundamental assumptions (Fook, 2015). It is, by its nature, difficult to implement within organisational cultures dominated by a narrow managerialism. Within a Community Education department, we introduced a number of initiatives, over the course of a year, to enhance such Critical Reflection. We report here on the process and its outcomes. First, we discuss the central role that Critical Reflection can have in informing decision making and individual professional development. We go on to outline the pressures on Community Education professionals who work within organisational cultures increasingly driven by a neo-liberal agenda, the managerialist imperatives of which undermine both the principles and practices of Critical Reflection. We then describe the process of introducing Critical Reflection into team processes using Reflective Circles and our evaluation of it, focusing on the use of Community Learning and Development (CLD) values to frame discussions. Finally, we draw some conclusions and outline the questions that this work poses.

Reflective Practice and Critical Reflection in Community Education

Reflective practice is often seen as central to the professional role, indeed is 'the bedrock of professional identity' (Finlay, 2008 p 2). It is most closely identified with the work of Donald Schön whose concept of the Reflective Practitioner has had a significant impact on the training of education professionals. Reflective Practice is often central in professional training programmes for Community Education professionals and identified as such within the Scottish Government Framework 'How good is the learning and development in our community' (Education Scotland, 2017).

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However, despite the widespread acceptance of Schön's work, there have been significant criticisms. Eraut (2004) faults it for the lack of precision and clarity, while Finlay (2008 p20) asks 'is reflective practice bland and mechanical with practitioners disinclined to ask awkward questions?' Smyth (1989) goes further, deploring the atheoretical and apolitical quality of Schön's conceptions:

> Schön himself proposes that the aim of reflective practice is to help practitioners "discover what they already understand and know how to do" (Schön, 1991 p5). It can be argued that such an approach reinforces the status quo and discourages perspectives that question existing structures. It takes for granted organisational goals, for instance, attempting to optimise the efficiency of achieving them, rather than questioning those goals themselves.

Critical Reflection, on the other hand, can be regarded as a more radical sub-set of Reflective Practice that focuses on the question of power (Fook, 2015). Brookfield (1995) argues that Critical Reflection tends to challenge paradigmatic suppositions (basic structuring axioms) in two ways: first, it examines how power influences educational processes; while, secondly, it recognises and uncovers hegemonic assumptions. Critical Reflection, according to Brookfield, is 'morally grounded' and requires practitioners to interrogate their deep values and beliefs (Brookfield, 2017 p 26). This, in turn, can lead to challenging of assumptions and questioning of organisational norms (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999). Critical Reflection is also a key element of the Transformative Learning theory of Jack Mezirow (1990) for whom it 'questions everything that practitioners had previously take for granted' (Onorati and Bednarz, 2010). As such, it not only reflects the core values of Community Education, but can also help to ensure that these are realised. These professional values, as represented by the CLD Standards Council for Scotland (the professional body for people working in Community Learning and Development), offered a key to the effective use of Critical Reflection in this study.

However, the process of Critical Reflection is not necessarily easy to undertake and may potentially involve personal and professional risk (Fook, 2015). Effective

reflection requires specific skills that may not be easy to acquire, as well as advanced levels of self-awareness. Furthermore, it may lead to cognitive dissonance, an awareness of contradictions and problems that may be deeply unsettling, especially for those unused to challenging the status quo. Such troubling knowledge may result in feelings of internal conflict and denial, especially for those who feel excluded from decision making and, so, having little agency.

If conducted in group settings, Critical Reflection may be seen as threatening and hazardous, resulting in participants developing uncertainty or even hostility to the process (Luft and Roughley, 2016). More fundamentally, as a radical technique that questions basic assumptions, it is likely to be regarded unfavourably by organisations that are increasingly dominated by a top-down managerialism ('New Managerialism') based on a neo-liberal ideology (Lynch, 2014).

For Community Education professionals, Critical Reflection is an important (perhaps an essential) way of challenging hegemonic assumptions, but never an easy one. Changes in the political context within which Community Education operates, as well as in public sector management practices that directly affect it, have of late made it even harder.

The impact Of Neo-liberalism on Community Education

Neo-liberalism, the dominant discourse in Western democracies, has reshaped the education landscape since it emerged in the 1980s. Holford (2016) argues, for instance, that the traditional 'democratic citizenship' model of Adult Education has been entirely 'snuffed out' by neo-liberalism. It is an ideology based on the primacy of the market place in all spheres of life, thereby converting public goods, such as education, into 'consumption goods' (Mayo, 2003, Frazer, 2018). With its preference for the private sector over the public it provides the ideological justification for austerity and cuts in public spending. The resulting increase in the number of those unemployed and in material need — that is, those most likely to benefit from Community Education — has been accompanied by a limiting of access, as services are cut.

While the material impact is invariably harsh, its rhetoric may be redolent with phrases suggestive of people 'doing it for themselves', not relying on the state for support (which becomes increasingly unavailable), thereby conforming perfectly with the prevailing neo-liberal discourse (Tabner, 2018). Examples of the way such ideas have become normalised include the development of 'human capital' ideology (Tett, 2017), the hidden power dynamics of co-production (Bradley, 2017), and the development of asset-based community development (MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014).

New Managerialism is the organisational arm of neo-liberalism (Lynch, 2014). It represents a rejection of traditional models of public sector management, which rested on notions of disinterested professional judgement, in favour of a business model of quasi-markets and tightening, target-driven management control (Frazer, 2018). In so doing, long-established professional values become further undermined (Housdon, 2016). Key features of this new managerialism include: increased control and surveillance by managers, and a corresponding weakening of professional autonomy and decision making, increased competition for resources using market principles, and a focus on outputs, outcomes, measurement, efficiency and productivity, engendering a target-based culture. (Shepard, 2017, Fraser, 2018 and Lynch, 2014)

The impact of this New Managerialism on Community Education manifests itself in several different ways. First productivity, efficiency and quantifiable outcomes may become the sole drivers of work, in contrast to process-driven Community Education values of empowerment and the promotion of lifelong learning. The learning journeys that individuals and communities embark on are processes that are often not amenable to such measures. As community educational professionals, we must frequently take approaches that work with individuals and communities at their own pace rather than on our own terms. Building relationships is key to realising these two values (of empowerment and the promotion of lifelong learning) and often the most 'efficient' or 'productive' methods may lead to outcomes that neither professionals nor the community itself desire. Secondly, marketisation occurs through the awards of funding bodies such as local authorities, The Big Lottery and the Scottish and UK governments, where educational projects vie for external funding in a neo-Darwinian survival of the

fittest (Holford, 2016). Thirdly, there is a focus on employability and a corresponding devaluation of other forms of learning. Finally, New Managerialism elevates management control into all aspects of its work, correspondingly undermining the professionalism of its front-line workers. Top-down decision making, symbolic consultation and the sidelining of professional values and competencies may become endemic, alongside the devaluation of professional development and professional standards. Younger professionals, who have experienced no other type of management, may be unused to challenging its narrative.

Within such a context, reflective practice has become a pale shadow of the sort of transformative Critical Reflection proposed by Mezirow, replaced instead by self-policing to ensure that staff meet management-imposed targets. How, then, can community education professionals resurrect a more meaningful Critical Reflection into our professional practice?

Introducing Critical Reflection into team meeting using CLD values

This article originated as an action research project aiming to introduce and evaluate the introduction of structured Critical Reflection within an Adult Learning team of a Community Education department. In August 2017, the idea of 'Reflective Circles' was introduced into team meetings 'to enhance reflection on professional practice'. The Reflective Circles method involved one member of the team introducing a piece of good practice, a challenge or opportunity, followed by an open discussion framed throughout with reference to professional values, namely those of the CLD Standard Council for Scotland. These are:

- *Self-determination* – respecting the individual and valuing the right of people to make their own choices.
- *Inclusion* – valuing equality of both opportunity and outcome, and challenging discriminatory practice.
- *Empowerment* – increasing the ability of individuals and groups to influence issues that affect them and their communities through individual and/or collective action.
- *Working collaboratively* – maximising collaborative working relationships in

partnerships between the many agencies which contribute to CLD, including collaborative work with participants, learners and communities.

- *Promotion of learning as a lifelong activity* – ensuring that individuals are aware of a range of learning opportunities and are able to access relevant options at any stage of their life.

(CLD, SCS 2018)

The Reflective Circles methodology was adopted in order to 'improve decision making by fostering a culture of continuous self-improvement through problem solving' guided by CLD values. The use of these professional values was intended to de-personalise discussion, allowing openness and a focus on decision making. The rationale was to share good practice and develop a culture of participatory decision making, while at the same time evaluating the extent of Critical Reflection within the team.

After six months, the views of participants were gathered from emails or face-to-face meetings. From this feedback, several themes emerged. Firstly, most participants felt the process of reflection helped to facilitate 'motivation and enthusiasm' within the team. Closely related to positivity about the process was an appreciation of the impact on team meeting interactions, with participants' favourable comments on the process focusing on learning from peers, team building, sharing good practice and engagement. This was associated with the building of trust within the team and the extent to which members felt that the process was inclusive, where all members felt that their opinion 'was wanted and of merit'. A representative comment was that 'all feel that they can speak freely without being shot down'. However, some participants expressed reservations that 'people might feel under pressure to raise a concern when they don't want to'. There was also some concern that using the values framework could look like the 'shoehorning' of ideas into 'inflexible categories'. Furthermore, some expressed concern that if Critical Reflection was involved in team meetings, it should be linked to action, rather than reflection for its own sake. This was especially so among more experienced staff who had experiences of a more bottom-up culture of decision-making, in contrast to newer staff.

The use of CLD values was, overall, regarded positively, with team members commenting that it helped to 'bring home what we are about and why we should be doing what we are'.

Discussion

The dominance of neo-liberal new managerialism presents existential challenges to the fundamental values of Community Education. With the many urgent problems that now face Community Education, Critical Reflection is needed more than ever as a way of reconnecting with those unique values and of formulating ways in which they are brought to bear on current problems. Our experiences suggest that explicitly using values, such as those of the CLD Standards Council for Scotland, presents one way to facilitate a return to Critical Reflection among professionals. Nevertheless, many problems remain apparent.

In an earlier piece of action research within the same organisation (MacLellan, 2010), a number of barriers to developing reflective practice within a group of adult learning tutors were identified. For some participants, especially, those who had not undergone professional community education training, the concepts involved were unfamiliar and clarity was not facilitated by the language used in some documents, with some participants feeling that the use of technical terms resulted in inaccessible jargon. Furthermore, some were wary of what was perceived as the top-down imposition of 'another piece of paper' that needed to be completed, while others were openly resistant to being required to reflect on their practice with colleagues, especially those in more senior positions. While these reactions were not evident in the present study, there remains the likelihood that they will arise in some circumstances.

Therefore, it is crucial that an appropriate culture, within which Critical Reflection may flourish, is established at the beginning of the process. Fook (2015) describes several required components 'in which it is safe and acceptable to be open and to expose professional vulnerabilities for the sake of learning'. These involve establishing ground rules which included confidentiality; openness; focus on 'responsibility' rather than 'blame'; non-judgmental attitudes and respect. Such ground rules should be developed,

as far as possible, by mutual consent and originate from participants themselves, rather than being imposed. The rights and responsibilities of all members of the group need to be explicitly acknowledged. Finally, Fook suggests the importance of separating two parts of the process: first the analysis of practice ('deconstruction') and secondly the need to take action ('reconstruction'). In the present study, a lack of clarity in distinguishing these two essential but distinct phases led to some frustration among participants. Nevertheless, our experiences in this study lead us to believe that the Reflective Circles method provides a way to safely reflect and generate new solutions.

There is also a danger of creating a one-size-fits-all framework for enhancing Critical Reflection within groups, and failing to recognise that every group will be unique in its experiences, challenges and culture. The introduction of a Critical Reflection culture requires a contingent approach, recognising such differences and building on their strengths.

The explicit use of values in the Reflective Circles method did, in this instance, provide a worthwhile method of facilitating Critical Reflection. These values are widely recognised and in general easily comprehended (although some participants found that the language used required initial clarification). Values and Critical Reflection have a symbiotic relationship in that they mutually enhance each other: Critical Reflection as a process is facilitated by the use of values as a framing device for discussions, while values are more likely to be appreciated and used following a process involving Critical Reflection.

Moreover, critical reflection enables practitioners to interrogate the values themselves and examine their compatibility - or otherwise - with the organisational goals set within a neo-liberal agenda. To what extent can practitioners entirely uphold the CLD value of empowerment, in particular, especially that element of it that refers to 'increasing the ability of … groups to influence issues that affect them and their communities through … collective action'? (CLD, SCS 2018)

However, we should also introduce a note of caution. Critical Reflection is a process, not an end-point. It should be constantly re-evaluated. The process should itself be

subject to reflexivity, in which the relevance and usefulness of Critical Reflection are fully evaluated while anticipating organisational responses. In the current instance we needed to question the extent to which basic assumptions were challenged in the way that Brookfield and Merizow propose. What was the balance between reflection on individual practice and consideration of wider organisational questions of policy? Did we really move beyond basic Reflective Practice – challenging enough in itself – to engage in a proper Critical Reflection? If we did so, did we move beyond the 'deconstruction' phase to 'reconstruction' – that is, of taking action?

While organisations continue to advocate Critical Reflection as a valued part of the learning process there is a worrying trend to undervalue it for professionals. This seems to be part of a wider phenomenon of depreciating the importance of professional development. As one participant in this study put it: 'There is a paradox here in that [our work] is about Lifelong Learning but we don't apply that to ourselves'. Using Reflective Circles and explicit values to generate Critical Reflection may offer one solution to that paradox.

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