# Universal to Targetted Community Learning and Development: changed work and a changing profession

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## Abstract

Research was undertaken as part of a Postgraduate Diploma in Community Learning and Development (CLD) to investigate the move from universal (or open access) to targeted work. This issue had been identified as a recent change in Scottish practice. A qualitative research approach was selected in order to obtain a rich, detailed picture of CLD professionals' perceptions and experiences of universal and targeted work. Experienced practitioners were approached for interview and four accepted. The interviewees were all asked the same three questions concerning their experience of engaging with learners through targeted and universal processes, the setting of outcomes through these different ways of working, and how they felt these different processes of engagement/targeting affect learners. An interpretivist approach was chosen using the subtle parameters of Freire's concept of empowerment which calls for recognition of the constant flux of interpretation as people develop critical awareness and gain power. Interviewees were quick to point out the assumptions behind the terms 'universal' and 'targeted' as they are presented antithetically in this context. This 'either/or' rhetoric suggests engaging in 'universal work' is working without aim, without target. The interviewees were concerned that disempowered people were being asked to change themselves rather than looking for ways for society to change. The interviewees emphasised that a voluntary element is a prerequisite for engagement to lead to the conditions necessary for empowerment.

1

Furthermore, it appeared that the practitioners themselves were disempowered and were not being treated as competent professionals.

## Introduction

The language or discourse of targeting learners for focused outcomes is embedded in the Requirements for Community Learning and Development Regulations 2013 (SSI 06/2013) and can now be found throughout local Community Learning and Development (CLD) strategic planning documents, reports and evaluations. In tandem with the requirement to target learners, the national regulations laid down requirements for promoting and encouraging partnership working with the aims of creating seamless services and producing cost efficiency. In the authors' opinion, targeting learners through partner referral rather than engaging with learners through universal work has ticked both boxes of seamless provision and cost efficiency.

The Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (2017), also known as the Christie Commission, recommended major changes in Scotland and can be regarded as further justification for targeting. The practice of targeting is also related to performance indicators and Fraser (2015) highlighted the important change brought about in public services in the UK with the birth of the performance indicator in 1985. The recent changes in CLD in Scotland can be seen as a natural progression, albeit thirty years in gestation, from the roll-out of performance indicators in the NHS, local government and education.

CLD is a profession that can be viewed as encouraging the empowerment of the oppressed, meaning those with the least or no power, as understood through Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). A targeted approach leads to the problem of appearing to decide who will be empowered which is contradictory. Thus, targeting, or choosing who needs to be worked with, and setting outcomes for individuals, sits

2

uneasily with a profession which is meant to facilitate people's empowerment of themselves.

Freire taught that the education of the oppressed, to be truly meaningful and addressing hegemonies, must avoid authoritarian teacher-pupil models, and should stem from dialoguing with people in a spirit of shared investigation (1970, p.107). Only in this spirit can the oppressed become empowered. Thus, empowerment is not something that is done to people but a freedom (or humanisation) that an individual embraces, on becoming critically aware of the world around them.

Attempts to empower individuals and communities are problematic (Engesbak et al., 2010, Servian, 1996). Thompson (2007) warns that empowerment is not something that can be done to people: it needs communication; building rapport with people; setting the agenda with people; and a key goal, that of people or groups ultimately making decisions themselves. He, thus, cautions against returning to an elitist professionalism with professionals making unilateral decisions. Although CLD professionals are the very people who should have this understanding and challenge any top-down approaches, in CLD today, it appears that targeting is accepted almost without question.

Furthermore, it is suggested that the practice of targeting particular individuals, or groups, for CLD interventions, risks stigmatising communities and individuals by the characteristics they are targeted for, with potentially negative connotations. This can be understood through the concept of othering people who are different (Stuart and Thomson, 1995).

There is the inference that the 'other', targeted individual or targeted community must be worked with to fit in and the need to target particular groups could be seen to assume a deficit on the part of the targeted rather than suggest overarching structural problems within wider society. Stuart and Thomson (1995) describe how the process of labelling difference, of 'othering' assumes a social norm, a definition of appropriate knowledge of truth. As Ledwith and Springett (2010) warned, what is seen as

3

normative then becomes part of everyday behaviour, and thus the existing social order is reproduced.

Not only does the practice of targeting risk stigmatising communities and individuals by the characteristics they are targeted for, this may also lead to other communities and individuals, with complex or less distinguishable needs, being overlooked. Where we target by characteristics, or by postcode statistics, with the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) data (Scottish Government, 2017), we may deny resources to those who face disempowerment in other ways. This is a complex situation and one might ask how we engage the least empowered without targeting? This requires us to explore our assumptions and interpretations of the term 'targeting'. There are many advocates of targeting particular groups to address the inequalities agenda, and of working to, and measuring nationally set outcomes, in order to ensure high standards of practice, and so that resources are channelled where there is evidence they are most needed. Thus, the aim of the research was to explore CLD practitioners' perspectives on the move from a universal approach to targeting people and communities.

**Methodology**

A qualitative research approach was selected in order to obtain a rich, detailed picture of CLD professionals' perceptions and experiences of universal and targeted work (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). A number of CLD workers in both promoted and non-promoted posts were emailed and invited to take part in the study. The enquiry framework was developed based upon the available time, budget and research capacity.

An interpretivist approach was chosen using the subtle parameters of Freire's concept of empowerment which calls for recognition of the constant flux of interpretation as people develop critical awareness and gain power. In the spirit of interpretive enquiry

4

interviews were relied on to define a picture of a reality understood through considered investigation but ultimately understood to be constrained (Angen, 2000).

Semi-structured interviews with CLD workers explored their experiences (positive, negative or neutral), perspectives and knowledge related to their current CLD practice. The interviewees worked in three different networks and their experience ranged from six to over thirty years of practice. All interviews followed ethical procedures of consent, confidentiality, and anonymity and took place face-to-face (SERA, 2011). In order to ensure continuing ethical practice, no interviewee is referred to by name. In addition to the interviews, documents related to CLD planning, practice and evaluation were also analysed but are not reported here.

**Findings**

Interviews were conducted with four CLD professionals (three women and one man) whose current and previous practice have been in various local authority settings in Scotland. No differences of opinion were discerned on the basis of gender, age or length of experience.

During the interviews there was a real eagerness to share experience and perspective. It was striking how critical of current services, the interviewees were. An image of a work environment where professionals are not treated as qualified and competent professionals developed. It appeared the professionals had become cynical and felt defenceless against what they saw as a tide of rules and regulations. These were practitioners who had strong opinions on the move away from local, universal work.

The interviewees were all asked the same three questions concerning their experience of engaging with learners through targeted and universal processes, the setting of outcomes through these different ways of working, and how they felt these different processes of engagement/targeting affect learners. Interviewees were quick to point out the assumptions behind the terms 'universal' and 'targeted' as they are presented

5

antithetically in this context. This 'either/or' rhetoric suggests engaging in 'universal work' is working without aim, without target. Referring to their own practice they challenged this assumption about what we now recognise as universal work. One interviewee stated

> Historically, these terms were not used, not important. We didn't think about it, we worked with Young People on the agenda that they wanted to work on …The word targeted is a misnomer you can 'target' people, you can work with people most in need, least empowered, without them being referred onto you, that's key to me. Targeted is a terrible word (interviewee 1).

The interviewees emphasised that a voluntary element is a prerequisite for engagement to lead to the conditions necessary for empowerment. They talked of more traditional, seemingly un-regimented approaches as the appropriate techniques for enabling a learning environment whilst also expressing concern that the current way in which they have to 'target', mostly by direct referral, sits at odds with this. For example, one interviewee contrasted previous ways of working with what is expected today:

> We addressed barriers so that people could take part, to make things universal … It might just have appeared as a bit of banter, but you would be asking questions, listening, it was really important to take that time to start the dialogue. Now we have young people signed, sealed and delivered, a written agreement … they've been marked for attention. That's not an empowerment model … they come as a problem to be fixed; that's not empowering (interviewee 1).

Another interviewee stated how the voluntary aspect of traditional youth work had disappeared:

> Targeting Young People is throwing work at them, it's something that happens to them, they're not volunteering, they're not engaging themselves. It's just another

6

thing that is happening to a vulnerable Young Person. Quite often it puts them in a passive role (interviewee 4).

Interviewees highlighted that the work planning and reporting structure, alongside the prescribed engagement method of referral or direct 'targeting' to pre-ordained priorities means that outcomes are set before meaningful engagement takes place and it is not the 'learners' who are deciding on the outcomes. Interviewees recognised that to varying degrees the people they are working with feel they are achieving positive outcomes but, at the same time, interviewees strongly expressed that this model lacks any form of autonomy, and opportunities for empowerment are thus suppressed. There was a worry that **'**at worst we are adding to the stigmatisation, division' (interviewee 3). While interviewee 1 implied that CLD workers had lost something:

> What we need to ask is 'Did the Young Person achieve what they wanted to achieve?... Do they know they can make a difference? … Outcomes? ... it's just words CLD have chosen to use, to be taken seriously by people who don't know what they do, but in all that language they've forgotten it's just words, what we did was good before we started using them (interviewee 1).

They also gave an example of universal work that was not appreciated by their employer:

> The young Mums would come along because they knew I was there, a friendly face. We broke down barriers, it looked like I was just there, drinking tea and coffee but I know I wasn't just there, drinking tea and coffee because you're trained you know, what you're trying to do, but the powers that be didn't recognise it they didn't think it was a good use of my time. It was a good piece of universal work as it brought a lot of the community together (interviewee 1).

There was mention of a difference in relation to empowerment between previous and current practice in CLD:

7

Community learning is not as radical as it used to be, we're not allowed, we should be doing ourselves out of a job, empowering people so much that you didn't have to be there. You were encouraged to fight real issues. Fight other departments 'Issue with housing dept.,' let's go for it!' I remember feeling like I was on the front line. We got people together, we felt like we were achieving stuff (interviewee 3).

This was explained by one interviewee as 'the unique art of community education is being lost, when we are doing it, we're doing it by stealth' (interviewee 1).

**Discussion**

Theories relating to power and empowerment were used to frame the narratives of the interviewees. The concept of othering broadened the concerns around targeting as a disempowering process. Theories of empowerment portray it as something that people must achieve for themselves and that cannot be done to a person (Freire, 1970; Thompson, 2007). Interviewees stated that targeting people or referring to an individual as a 'learner' may imply making a judgement of what that individual needs to learn. Rather than people posing questions about the world around them, they are identified or labelled as someone who needs fixed at an individual level.

Interviewees stated that universal CLD work had been misunderstood, and because of that, the profession of CLD has been misunderstood. CLD workers said that they are seen as different and distinct from other educators. Previously, the nature of community education had to be informal. In line with its core agenda of community empowerment it was necessary to avoid an authoritarian style of education. The professionals interviewed in this enquiry passionately explained how universal work was an integral part of CLD professionals' identity and role, an essential and key tool in empowerment.

8

What came across from the interviewees was the sense that open access work was a more empowering starting point, where there was a sense of equality between the community worker and the community, where the worker got to know the community and created space for dialogue. When people were engaged through open access or universal work they came as volunteers on their own agenda, they chose to get involved, to act. It was not divisive and did not stigmatise communities, the way working with chosen groups can. A community worker could identify barriers people may have faced, by being out in the community.

This was a small-scale study so it is not possible to say from this study whether this problem is repeated across Scotland. The micro-management of the services they worked in, along with the levels of reporting and guidance, were felt to be restricting by the interviewees. They understood the value of the work they were being asked to do, but they felt they were not able to carry out the meaningful empowering work they were trained to do. They saw their professionalism as undervalued and this led them to question their professional identity. The level of guidance and the strategic plans they are expected to comply with, feels undermining when they do not agree with them. Most worrying of all, there seemed to be an encroaching cynicism that they could not change the system, that they were powerless. The CLD workers did not identify the work they were doing as community empowerment.

It is difficult to deny the logic of the policy of targeting learners, channeling resources where they are most needed, but universal or open access work can be a more empowering way to engage and even target learners. Furthermore, there is the disconnect that the outcomes CLD workers are working towards are not set by the people they are working with, but instead are being set by politicians and policy makers.

**Conclusion**

9

The picture formed during this research was of a lack of connection between policy and practice and of a stifled profession with professionals unable to do the work they were trained to do, who were frustrated and felt disempowered. It could be argued that they are working in a unique service that is becoming extinct at a local level, and that disempowered communities are not likely to achieve meaningful empowerment as an environment appears to have developed where disempowered people are made to look more to themselves to change rather than casting a critical eye at the society which oppresses them. It appears that CLD has become a profession based on competencies reflecting its empowering objective but its practitioners are not treated as competent professionals.

This research consists of a small data set, however, the picture which unfolded, of why and how some local services have developed may be familiar to others and warrants further research.

Following this research we feel there needs to be a discussion about what CLD was, what it is becoming and what may be lost when we leave behind a service that 'hangs out' with the community. CLD professionals could fight their corner and explain the value of what they used to do, rather than survive by fitting in with other professions. When CLD moves from universal provision to a targeted approach it should be understood what is being given up. The irony is that the profession which should be facilitating the empowerment of others has not yet empowered itself.

*Since data gathering in 2015 there have been significant changes, including structural, to the CLD services interviewees practice with in.*

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