

Reflections on 40 Years of ALP (the Adult Learning Project)

Stan Reeves

Stan Reeves, now retired, is keen to share his experience of Freire-inspired approaches to adult education and community development

Dialogue is the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name the world. ... If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. (Paulo Freire (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Penguin)

Having been raised in a small mining town in South Lanarkshire, I was aware of the legacy of the early socialist pioneers. I would pass Keir Hardie Road on my way to the swimming pool at Robert Smillie Memorial Park. These two founders of the British Labour Party were committed to bettering the lives of working people and to Scottish independence as a way out of British imperialism.

In London, in the late 1960s and early 70s, I began to see how cultural action had a very important role to play in liberation. Having graduated as a photographer from Glasgow College of Printing, I did freelance work for charities and worked out of the New Arts Lab in Camden Town, a centre of the then blossoming 'counter culture'. The place was ablaze with ideas and actions opposed to the mainstream. A diet of Marx, Marcuse and Fromm, Ed Berman and radical magazines! I also worked with artists and makers in the pioneering adventure playgrounds in Camden, and shared house with architects, teachers and a professor of philosophy. It was an awakening for a young man from a culturally-conservative society. Violence, class antagonism and sectarianism were part of daily life in Lanarkshire, but so too were a strong sense of

community, and a belief in socialism and the transformative power of rational education.

Participative art and cultural and political work in working-class districts in London demonstrated to me that liberation from the dominant hegemony through *praxis* was possible. We were all reading *Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich who, having founded the Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, hosted Paulo Freire, Susan Sontag, Erich Fromm, Peter L. Berger, among other leading liberation intellectuals. The *praxis* (which Freire defines as ‘reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed’) I encountered in London in the late 60s/early 70s continues to encourage and inspire me, as it was there I directly experienced its creative liberating power.

I studied Freire more systematically at Moray House College in Edinburgh as part of the Community Education course, so I was already predisposed to the proposal to start a Freire-based project in a working-class district in west Edinburgh. I was one of 3 workers appointed by Lothian Regional Council’s Community Education Service, to work in collaboration with an already-established group of local volunteers to found a new project, incorporating the ideas and practice of Freire into a developed post-literate western context. This was ALP or the Adult Learning Project. I subsequently spent almost 32 years (from September 1979 to April 2011) in ALP putting these ideas into practice in a vital collaboration with the other workers and volunteer leaders, activists and participants in an educational and community development process. This process has been meaningfully documented in *Living Adult Education: Freire in Scotland* by Gerri and Colin Kirkwood, originally published in 1988. The second edition of this book includes a new chapter which brings the story up to 2011.

In this article I intend to reflect on some of the ‘significant moments’ for me in the project, which illustrate the power of Freire’s ideas in action. This will be just a

snapshot of the creative learning, actions and projects in the community, nationally and internationally, that workers and participants in dialogue have taken to address problems posed in the contradictory culture they inhabit.

Coding and decoding: investigating reality and posing problems

We describe the ALP process as having 4 main stages or characteristics: investigating social reality; coding and decoding that reality and identifying social problems; learning programmes; action outcomes.

We designed all of these processes around a participatory dialogical method. At every stage, therefore, local participants were invited to take part, with many of them taking on leadership roles. These processes were not always experienced in the same sequence by participants. For example, someone might go to an ALP women's writing event in a festival (action outcome), take part in a discussion of local issues (decoding), go on to join a women's history project (learning programme) and then join a group involved in a political campaign for funding for a women's festival (action outcome). Thus, within the project we established an action/reflection cycle, and a partnership between the local member participants and the workers who managed and drove it on.

Returning to the very first co-investigation with the first groups of participants, I will describe a significant moment in one of these groups.

Following a period of investigating with a dozen local participants, we invited more local people to a series of decoding sessions which we billed as discussions. Thirty folk signed up. Three groups met weekly over a period of seven weeks, and we tried out the decoding of photographs and images made by a local artist. These, we hoped, crystallised the issues and contradictions we had identified in the investigation. The decoding method presents an enlarged image or a photo of a familiar social situation

and then develops a conversation by posing a series of questions leading from asking folk to describe everything they can see (objective) to asking how they feel (affective or reflective) to asking why this situation has come about (interpretative). In short, to hold a dialogue where the participants' voices would be paramount and subsequently acted on. Up till then we had only studied Freire's method and had no idea if people would respond, or how. Would the method translate from work with illiterate and semi-literate Brazilian peasants and workers to a post-industrial literate setting? We knew that the future programme of the project would be determined by the results of these discussions and were therefore worried about the outcome. Failure meant a complete rethink of the whole basis of the project.

The first few sessions were nervous as the unfamiliar situation felt a little stiff. One participant thought it was a bit 'babyish' to be asked direct questions. But gradually, as the weeks went by, folk became more comfortable and trusting of one another and the leader more flexible in the method, following the lead of the folk and making sure everyone who wanted to make a contribution was encouraged to have their voices heard. One of the most powerful features of the method was recording the issues raised to be acted on, as the participants began to feel that their words were being taken seriously and might affect an outcome in the project and beyond. The codes or images discussed weekly were of the community, the family, education, the workplace, women's role, the media and Scottish identity. And so it progressed.

I was worried about the final session on Scottish identity. We had chosen an image of a very famous 'significant moment' in Scottish life: the occasion in 1977 when, for the first time in many years, the Scottish team had beaten the English team 2-1 at Wembley, the high altar of English football. The image depicts a moment when the Scottish fans, having invaded the pitch like an army, demolished the goal posts and dug up the turf as souvenirs, with one happy fan amongst thousands raising his fist in triumph. I was worried because we were a mixed group of young and old, women and

men. Would this image offend? The young men in the picture had been called ‘thugs’ in the press and many Scots were embarrassed by this vigorous display of male exuberance. The method, however, made us consider all aspects of the image. An industrial worker’s hard hat was held aloft and was described as a symbol of the young men’s class position along with flags, Scots bonnets and lots of tartan as identifiers of their national allegiance. A banner remembering Bannockburn raised the issue of the ‘historicity’ inherent in the image. Most of all, the sheer joy on their faces showed an emotional release that made the image less threatening. The most prominent figure was smiling while raising his fist in a triumphal salute. I needn’t have worried. Concentrating first on the objective reality had already expanded the possible interpretation of the image, and then we moved on to how the image made us feel (the affective/reflective level.) Freire’s belief and experience that dialogue will unveil the contradictions and themes inherent in a social situation was made manifest in the lively discussion which ensued. The potential evil of nationalism, the relationship between Scotland and England being likened to class war, colonialism, comparisons of the treatment of Scots as colonial subjects with the treatment and depression of native Americans, male chauvinism and patriarchy, feelings of shame and pride were all discussed and recorded.

The moment comes in a decoding when you ask the participants to empathise with the people in the picture and imagine what they are feeling. A young mother, who in previous sessions had become very articulate, had not spoken much this time. She was a recent immigrant from England. How was she feeling? Threatened? Critical? Alienated? How could she relate to this image of a young man’s triumph and joy in overcoming an old enemy? What is this man with his fist in the air feeling, and when did you last feel like that? She leaned into the group. ‘This young man has been held back by his place in society and here for once he feels like a winner. He has challenged a social group who he feels to have power over him. I felt like this when I gave birth to my baby, naturally. I felt bullied by the middle-class, male doctors who

wanted me to do it their way, and I felt powerless to resist the establishment. I knew how I wanted it to be and just quietly stuck to my plan and so when he was born naturally and healthy, I felt that same sense of triumph and power.’

I was profoundly moved by her contribution. The clarity of her analysis of the shared issues, and the empathy she showed for someone she could easily have felt threatened by was inspiring. This was the last session of an unproven method and it worked beyond our expectations. The three groups came together to share and crystallise their findings in a meeting, followed by a party to celebrate the energy, creativity and clarification we had discovered on our journey together.

Investigation leads to learning and acting together

The power of the problem-posing dialogue in decoding the world had clearly demonstrated the possibility of breaking what Freire calls the ‘culture of silence’. From that moment we could trust that the method would identify learning programmes and action outcomes which we could invite the wider community to participate in, and that the themes we uncovered were ‘generative’. This proved to be the case!

This period of investigation, coding and decoding led directly to the creation of the curriculum of the project. Having identified ‘generative themes’ and contradictions in the life of the community, we then asked: What do we need to know more about, and do, in order to tackle the issues raised? The responses to this question generated ideas for learning programmes and action outcomes. The use of the word ‘tackle’, rather than solve, demonstrated our awareness that we can only take folk on the start of a journey.

Over the next eight years learning projects led to action outcomes. Learning Programmes on the Family, Schooling, Scottish Identity, Health, Women's Studies,

Parenting in Other Cultures and Media Studies led directly to community development projects addressing the question: What should we *do* in order to tackle the issues raised? These projects included the creation, funding and management of a Photography Workshop, Writers' Workshops, Parents' Centre, Skills Exchange and Unemployed Workers' Centre, and the establishment of a democratic process of overall management. We created a registered charity as a partnership between the workers and the participants: the ALP Association. In the spirit of dialogue, and as a means of enlarging the rate of participation overall, participants were trained in leadership and dialogical methods, creating a cohort of activists taking responsibility for the programme and developments in the community.

Learning leads to collective action and making in the community

In order to codify the 'themes of the Epoch' we discovered that using photographs of very local situations had a powerful generative effect. This led to us creating the Gorgie/Dalry Photo Workshop. The deal was simple: I would teach folk the skills of social documentary photography; they would take a brief from the investigations to make photos to be decoded and exhibited locally. The aim, as Freire put it, was to 'represent clearly that which we got confusedly'. Their learning and making would become a resource for ALP and the wider community. We recruited local folk and were delighted that very quickly a vibrant group came together. We raised money and built a darkroom in a church basement out of which we worked for a few years until the group was so big (with more than 50 members) that we were able to secure more funding and convert a local shop into a studio/meeting room plus darkroom and production facility. Many of our action groups went on to become voluntary organisations in their own right, and the Photo Workshop did just that. For 10 years or so it supplied ALP with a vast store of images depicting the social issues in the area, but also followed its own agenda of learning, sharing and exhibiting.

A significant moment in the life of the project is captured in a film made for Channel 4 ‘Liberating literacies’:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaACY1oNg90>

Here we see the opening of a photographic exhibition ‘Scotland and its People’, curated by the Photo Workshop and including images from photographers and photographic groups from right across the country.

In 1988/89 ALP took the crucial decision that the political problem of the epoch was the drive for autonomy in Scotland. A cultural/political movement was underway and we wanted our folk to be part of it. We decided to shift our focus from the local to the national. The flowering that resulted from that decision is explored in the second edition of *Living Adult Education*.

A Photographic exhibition was to be part of our contribution to that movement, creating a ‘Living Code’ that would be launched in Edinburgh and travel all over Scotland over the next 2 years. The Channel 4 film shows many of the elements which went into the ALP process. John Paul, a student with literacy issues, takes a leadership role in a history learning group. The nature of the learning group is shown to be dialogical. He talks eloquently about his experience as a teacher/student. We see the co-operative nature of the process as the photographers and many other activists from ALP come together to hang the exhibition. The emphasis on the celebration of learning and action, which is so much part of the ALP process, is shown as the newly formed ALP Scots Music Group underline the national nature of the themes, playing Scots music as entertainment. Our solidarity is celebrated as we sing ‘Auld Lang Syne’. All of the activity in the film is overseen and commented on from Brazil by Paulo Freire himself, who knew the ALP project well from our writings as well as his own participation with us in a training programme for community workers held in Dundee in 1988. He could ‘smell freedom’!

Thus John Paul, while improving his oracy, literacy and confidence through the process, experiences ‘authentic comradeship, rather than false gregariousness’, in his co-operation with others. In short, he becomes part of a democratic learning community. His action is effective at a local, national and international level. He becomes critically conscious.

Cultural action for freedom

Over 30 more years our confidence in the method grew, the more we used it. Learners became activists, activists became learners, and new projects sprang to life. The unique relationship whereby 3 workers were in ongoing employment with the City Council, and the ALP Association could secure much additional funding, gave a great sense of security as well as a basis for trying new things. The extensive investigation held in 1989/90 identified seven major themes, one of which was to do with cultural identity. Specifically, given the dominance of commodified pop culture, many people were ambivalent about indigenous traditional music, song and dance. We were aware of the role of folk music in liberation movements across the globe as well as the national cultural awakening in Scotland. I gathered a dozen local traditional musicians together and we discussed the contradictions inherent in the practice. Out of these discussions we designed and launched, in 1990, the Scots Music Group, which became a national cultural phenomenon. Within 6 years we had 500 adult students learning Scots instrumental music, song and dance, a youth music school and a national festival of fiddle music. We had tapped into a rich seam in the ‘culture of silence’. We used this energy to put on public events, concerts and dances to promote these arts and raise money, as well as stimulating a positive attitude in the wider community. A revival of interest in indigenous social dance meant that we could fill halls with up to 400 dancers.

We held a special event to raise money to send Rona Brown, a local ALP

learner/activist and leader, on a tour of South Africa, along with other activists from central Scotland, to examine and learn from the reconciliation and community development process there. She returned and led us in learning from her experience. The following year a group of young traditional dancers and performance artists from the township of Gugulethu was brought to Scotland, funded by groups here. Before their arrival, they had been listening to a CD of the Robert Fish Band, which had evolved from an ALP open dance band rehearsal. ALP was using this band to reintroduce local people to the tradition of Scots social dancing. Learners become activists!

The young folk from Gugulethu, as dancers in their own traditions, related to the nature of Scots dance music in a way that was more natural for them than relating to classical, pop or jazz forms, and were keen to collaborate with the band. So, as well as visiting local schools and communities performing their drumming, dancing and theatrical depictions of life in the townships, the group rehearsed a big performance piece with the Robert Fish Band. A local kilt company kitted out the 10 youngsters in tartan and they proceeded to the posh Assembly Rooms to put on their show as part of the regular ALP dances. 400 dancers sat and enjoyed a moving and vigorous display of exciting, skilful and almost acrobatic dancing from these youngsters. The climax was when the band struck up an arrangement of a well-known Scottish reel, and these black folk from one of the poorest and most oppressed communities on the planet burst onto the floor and interpreted, embellished and enlarged the music with their dance. We were challenged by their positivity, power and joy. We were challenged to watch teenagers working so hard together and communicating to their audience across culture, race and age. We were challenged by their enthusiasm for our music, dance and traditions, which, historically, we had belittled and turned away from. In ALP we had reconnected with these artistic forms, learned them anew and become 'subjects not objects' in our cultural action. We were 'saying our own word'. *Praxis!*

The thriving of praxis

We were developing a multi-cultural programme in collaboration with the Refugee Council, creating thematic dialogues between our participants and refugees, asylum seekers and migrants - and then the refugee funding was withdrawn. At a meeting of the ALP Association Rona said, 'Let's take on the programme ourselves'. Thus, through the ALP Association, 'The Welcoming' was born. Local volunteers began teaching English and collaborating in social events and cultural orientation. The Welcoming has now thrived for 15 years as an independent organisation.

The Writers Workshop, having learned how to run as an autonomous group, has made a huge contribution to the life of ALP and continues helping folk to 'say their own word'. Women's learning programmes on writing, history, music and art developed into the activist organisation Enact which for a number of years co-ordinated Women's International Day events across Edinburgh. A chance conversation regarding the fact that many working-class men only talked articulately about football led to the establishment of a highly successful literacy and football project called 'Glory and Dismay'. Social events and celebrations draw together all the participants and give a first platform for them to articulate what they have learnt and to be in solidarity with others. The learners, with the teachers and workers, have to work together to make all this happen. These moments I have described are but a small sample of the many encounters in 32 years.

All this activism, arising from learning programmes, has inevitably led to clashes with established views. For example, one writer's pamphlet was attacked as too political; public meetings on the Poll Tax and water privatisation, developed and hosted by our groups, had to be defended on the grounds that our task was educational; a letter was sent from the Duke of Atholl, then the Chair of the Scottish Landowners' Federation, decrying our leadership in public meetings initiated by our Land Studies Group regarding legislation limiting access to land; creating a series of programmes on

Scottish issues in the 1990s in music, history and languages was criticised, mainly by the Labour left, as ‘promoting nationalism’. Activism always makes someone uncomfortable!

The Freirian ‘problem-posing’ method of identifying and exploring social issues, out of which grow programmes of learning and cultural action in the community, is consistently made manifest in the experience and practice of ALP. The direct relationship between reflection leading to action, *praxis*, has inspired, energised and sustained the folk in the organisation, in the community, the city, the nation and beyond.

In September 2019 we celebrated 40 years of transformative dialogical education in St.Brides Centre in Dalry, Edinburgh on the very spot where the project first began. Two hundred learner-teachers, activists, organizers and collaborators came together and celebrated our journey. Long may the ALP Association continue to thrive!

References

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