The Golden Thread: Strengthening Community Education professionals' practice in Higher Education through Shared Principles and Values

David Wallace, Lecturer in Community Education, University of the West of Scotland

Jamie Hopkin, Senior Lecturer in Education, University of the West of Scotland

Alan Cusack PhD Lecturer in Community Education, University of the West of Scotland

Abstract:

The community education team at the University of the West of Scotland engaged in a critical planning day that sparked rich dialogue and critical debate. This article reflects on the insights and evaluations from this session, aiming to unify the community of practice in higher education around core principles and values. The goal is to establish a consensus on these shared values and principles, supporting future co-production, scholarship, and the development of the programme at UWS.

Central to our identity are the shared values of social justice and human rights, aligning with both community education policy and the civic engagement principles of the University. This paper highlights our commitment to these 'ideals' and their influence on our teaching, learning, and assessment practices. Our work is grounded in theoretical foundations from John Dewey, Antonio Gramsci, and Paulo Freire, emphasising community, democracy, cultural hegemony, and critical consciousness. These principles guide our critical civic praxis and our collective approach to teaching and community engagement.

Higher education plays a crucial role in promoting diversity, social inclusion, and community. By fostering grassroots activism, we aim to empower and engage in democratic processes and

1

challenge regressive ideologies. Our objective is to inspire students to embrace these values and sustain movements for social change.

Keywords: Community Education, Community Learning & Development, Higher Education, Principles and Values, Youth Work, Adult Education.

Introduction

On January 25, 2024, a pivotal planning day for the community education team at the University of the West of Scotland catalysed a rich dialogue and spirited debate. This article reflects on the insights and critical appraisals that emerged from this collaborative session, aiming to weave a golden thread through our community of practice in higher education.

The purpose of this paper is to delineate the core principles and values that unify the community education professionals in higher education. By building consensus around these central tenets, we strive to bolster our collective aspirations for future co-production, scholarship, and the ongoing development of the community education programme. This reflective journey not only underscores our shared commitment to these ideals, but also charts a path for their practical implementation and sustained impact.

The Shared Value Base

Enumerating our shared value base, the paper aims to make explicit our central concern for social justice and human rights. Intrinsic to our shared identity, these values simultaneously advance ideals expressed discretely through policy in the community education field (CLDSC,2024(a)), and in the progressive statements on civic and community engagement at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS, 2024).

It is this conjunction of the personal, professional, and institutional that informs and licences our critical appraisal of community practice, policy, and politics. It explicitly shapes our

planning intentions for the future of the community education programme at Undergraduate, Masters, and Doctoral levels. The stance we adopt is connected, consequently, to our unified philosophy for teaching, learning, and assessment; to critical engagement with policy and practice; to our collective and connected research interests; and to our embedded role as citizen academics within the University of the West of Scotland. We put ourselves to service as 'public intellectuals' (Giroux, 2015, p.99; Griffin, 2014, p,230) with a political project in which we assume:

> … a responsibility to share a commitment to language as a site of experimentation, power, struggle, and hope in the interests of building democratic social movements that are inspired and informed (Giroux, 2015, p.99).

In this, like Choudry (2020, p.28), we remain critically aware of the need to think beyond the sometimes-self-referential loops of academic scholarship:

> ... to take the opportunity to learn from how organisers, activists, and people in struggles think, learn, analyse, and generate knowledge in the course of organising for progressive social change …

The commitments of our shared value base, as academics and employees of UWS, require dissemination to constituencies that include the wider staff networks at UWS; the academic community implementing programmes for community education and related practices; the community of students on the community education programme; the wider community of practice in our field including the Standards Council; and to policy makers and key influencers. We must also find a way to signal our solidaristic principles to grassroots communities that are often ignored or rendered invisible in university discourse.

Social Justice and Community Development

Though universal in ethos, with a concern for the commonweal, the practices of community learning and development in Scotland are evidently aligned to discrete issues arising within specific geographies and in particular populations, in which and for whom inequality, poverty, and structural discrimination are existential. Collectively, we are therefore proprietorial about a field of practice that, in principle, sustains the prospect of transformational change, empowerment, and community development as part of a mission for social justice (Scottish University Collective, Open Letter, 2024; SCLDSC, 2024 (a)). Such community action according to Rheaume (2022)

> … is intimately connected to the social context and to the role of the State, that is to say, etched directly into the dynamic of the civil society in a context that is simultaneously social, economic, political and cultural.

We therefore commit to policies of the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, and the Scottish Community Learning and Development Standards Council that embody a social justice agenda. Indicative of this are the strategic aims of practice expressed in public policy through aspirations for empowerment, participation, self-determination, partnership, lifelong learning, and equality and inclusion (Scottish Government, 2012, p.3; CLDSC,2024(b)). Our appraisal of wider UK, European, and Global policies develop through the same informed critical lens.

By contrast, given a collective stance on inequality, we fundamentally reject and critique policy and politics that lead to undermining or withdrawal of the welfare safety net. This is routinely manifest in an economic system that erodes public consensus and that is skewed permanently away from those in greatest need. We stand in solidarity therefore with citizens who suffer

from undermining of public services on the grounds of ideologies like neoliberalism. And we seek to articulate a challenge to politics that lead to economic crisis, the effect of which is austerity policies, concomitant and recurring cost of living crises, and embedded structural inequality. The withdrawal of the state from community-based public services through privatisation, asset transfer, and diminution of rights, stands as a stark correlation with these political and economic trends.

Thinking globally and acting locally on such matters, we further identify with the ethos of pluriversality (Reiter, 2018; Mignolo 2018) and with the overarching consequences of the climate emergency and ecological degradation (Tornberg, 2021; Zaunseder, Woodman and Emejulu, 2022). In this we are alert to the necessity for movements representing:

> … a democratic, insurrectionary and prefigurative form of citizenship that [seeks] to bring into being new political subjectivities and forms of life outside and against the existing, constituted order, in new political communities. Radical democratic citizenship entails forms of struggle against gross social, economic, and political miseries and injustices.

> Zaunseder, Woodman and Emejulu, (2022, p.2)

Civic University Ideals

In response to the clarion call for 'radical democratic citizenship', the imperative of informed and principled community engagement assumes greater significance for higher education (Wallace, 2020). We suggest that this is truest of UWS given the diversity of its student population, the grassroots populations around the university that suffer the worst social and economic indices, and the commitment of UWS to civic university principles.

John Dewey (1987) wrote that education is predicated on a democratic impulse and on the engagement of community. Indeed, Dewey defined democracy as a shifting and dynamic process that required nurturing and renewal through various forms of community association so that it may be made and remade over time (Dewey, 1991, as cited in Joseph Rowntree Trust, 2006, p. 118).

At the point at which we undertake our staff and programme review, we are experiencing a period of political turmoil shaped by post-truth politics, the rise of the right wing and neo fascists, and toxic populism. Combined, these undermine principles of social justice, disparage progressive scholarship ideals and democratic intellect (Giroux, 2015; Waisbord, 2018). Alongside dog-whistle transphobia, misogyny and racism, assaults on critical thinking, attacks on peaceful protest movements, climate change denial, and anti-vaccination tropes, collectively represent the apotheosis of this phenomenon (Wallace, 2020). Higher education cannot sit on the sidelines given an assault on dispassionate and critical scholarship that is central to democratic values and social justice (Bergan & Harkavy, 2018; Braun, 2019; Griffin, 2014). We believe that practitioners in community education are well placed to contribute to solidaristic, grassroots activism, and community development. By these progressive and educative means, citizens, supported to engage in democratic process toward political literacy, may be empowered and hence inoculate their community against such nihilistic tropes.

Indeed, in the preface to the Council for Europe document on Higher Education for Diversity, Social Inclusion and Community, Samardzic-Markovic asserts a democratic imperative for higher education:

> *Higher education is not just well placed to further diversity, social inclusion, and community. Higher education has a moral duty to do so, and we need not look far to*

see why this is a more important part of the mission of higher education than ever

before (in Bergan & Harkavy, 2018, p. 5).

Crucially, we draw on the literature on civic university and social purpose. Whilst questioning elitist and neoliberal impulses in higher education (most notable in the idiom of ivory towers), we envisage a more egalitarian and empowering possibility for community engagement and social responsibility in higher education (Bender, 2008; Bok, 1984; Coffield & Williamson, 2011; Douglas, 2012; Hooper, 2016). Fundamentally, we seek to influence what the university does in terms of the three pillars of civil society, civic engagement, and social responsibility. Key to our shared mission, as academics reading community education, is therefore the urge to promote and sustain these three pillars, taking UWS ideals and standing to project the benefits of community education into surrounding grassroots communities via our students, professional networks, combined citizenship, and sustainable community development planning.

Theoretical Foundations

These aspirations for social justice are connected in a conceptual framework (Wallace,2003), by which means specific theorists and historical traditions provide the firm foundations through domains of practice to processes of informal education, community learning, and critical civic praxis (Ginright and Commorota, 2007). Engagement through active citizenship seeks to exemplify transformative change for social justice. Though not universally represented through contemporary community learning and development, the history of community education is consistently connected to the principles embodied in such firm foundations. Clear theoretical guiding lights, and therefore central to these foundations are:

- John Dewey - the significance for powerful learning residing in community, experience, and democracy (Ord,2009; Rosales,2012; Wallace, 2017)

- Antonio Gramsci - the centrality of cultural hegemony and the role of organic and working-class intellectuals relative to counter hegemony (Ledwith, 2001; Ledwith & Springett, 2022)

- Paulo Freire - building toward critical consciousness and praxis (Ledwith 2001; Ledwith & Springett, 2022)

Together, these theoretical principles provide for a critical civic praxis (Ginwright & Commarota, 2007) that has potential as both a bedrock for fieldwork in community education, and for our combined approach to teaching, learning, and assessment in the university. Referring to this process as a legitimate educational aim, Tett (2010) provides a definitional reference point in which social change is characterised as:

> … the articulation of a vision (like ours) that expresses the social nature of our experience, which aims to turn personal troubles into public issues, and to support social movements that act to transform the world.

Critical community education, as articulated here, is aligned with Freirean pedagogy. It embodies aspirations for practice that seek to establish a critical relationship between pedagogy and politics, 'highlighting the political aspects of the pedagogical, and drawing attention to the implicit and explicit domain of the pedagogical inscribed in the political' (McLaren, 2005: xxxvii). Our analysis of community education as critical is grounded, therefore, in characteristics for pedagogy (in the community and in our institution) that engages learners as actors in their social or political contexts; where learning is collaborative, dialogical, informal, and problem posing (Coburn and Gormally, 2017; Wallace and Coburn, 2018; Ledwith &

Springett, 2022). Inculcating traditions of critical pedagogy, informal education, and community development are instrumental to our reflexive practice and are therefore instrumental to our unified thesis for democratising practice and scholarship (Crowther et al, 2017; Martin, 2008).

Solidaristic work through subscription to a community of practice.

Writing about the problematic appearance of pedagogy in post-compulsory education, Sommerlad (2003, p,152) identifies a range of learning theories that are key to our stance, and which include the work of Lave and Wenger (on communities of practice), Scribner and Brown (on situated learning) and draws, among others, from Vygotsky (Zone of Proximal Development). From this she further assists us by highlighting core concepts of these theoretical positions to which we subscribe:

1. an emphasis on learning as a social or distributed activity rather than an individual cognitive activity

2. a focus on learning in communities rather than as isolated individuals

3. incorporating the social world of the learner into the educator's identity

4. the centrality of the learning setting or context to the learning process.

The articulation of a golden thread for our students, *and* for ourselves, chimes with Wenger (1998, p.277) who confirms the importance of identity in noting that 'If learning is a matter of identity, then identity is itself an educational resource'. The approach we adopt in a collective engagement of students in problem-based learning (in class and on placement) fits productively therefore with the notion of learning in communities of practice and to the collective and shared aspirations further exemplified by Wenger who noted:

> Mutual engagement involves not only our competence, but the competence of others. It draws on what we do and what we know, as well as on our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don't do and what we don't know - that is, to the contributions and knowledge of others. (Wenger, 1998, p.76)

Wenger's conception is also of wider utility to our shared vision. Our espoused plurality and inclusivity, our approach to inculcate informal education principles, and our drive to embed theoretical scholarship in real world practice, brings the potential overlap in focus that comes from collaborative and dialogical approaches to learning and research.

This overlap is equally important within the domain of academia; a field that often privileges logocentric methods of research (Davis, 2023). A program of study defined by an engagement with practice must recognise and value the academic rigor of practice itself. Our students' practices are the work they do, situated and embedded in communities. They should not be understood as self-contained episodes of learning, but social processes that generate new knowledge. As academics, we welcome and encourage a broad understanding of what is considered research and the various forms of knowledge this may take (Azzartito,2023). With this in mind, we take an expanded and sustainable approach to our assessment processes (Nguyen, & Walker, 2016) that reflects the polyphonic landscape of community learning and development in the West of Scotland. It is our hope that through a curriculum that embraces alternative and, arguably, more inclusive ways of knowing, it may offer our students the skills to imagine and discover more just ways of living together.

According to Wenger, we all participate in multiple communities of practice at once and, for this reason, we echo Giroux (2015) in developing the concepts of boundaries (connections that

create bridges across the communities of practice), boundary practices (community engagement and dialogue), as well as brokering (where people introduce elements of one practice into another). These become important features of our conceptual framework and hence of our connecting golden thread.

Conclusion

We enter this endeavour concerned about societal divisions and inequality. As change agents (Brookfield 1995; Doring, 2002) we therefore passionately advocate the need for societal change through community engagement and community development (Beck and Purcell, 2020). Like Analla et al (2023, p.1313), we envisage curriculum development as a group 'agentic project' given impetus by the golden thread of principles articulated here. As change agents we are concerned with inculcating, in each generation of community education graduates, the catalyst for change through emancipatory knowledge construction as they move into qualified practice. Seeking to identify a golden thread that connects and inspires us, the process is not intended to be 100% definitive. Indeed, it must necessarily be dynamic and capable of review and adaption to engage student experience, to meet new circumstances, theoretical developments, and wider innovations. Rather, it is an exercise in making explicit our collective stance, nurturing a set of principles and values around which we, staff and students, can coalesce and prepare for the future.

The golden thread is, however, anchored to a set of strategic principles informing us as academics employed by the University of the West of Scotland. It is grounded in turn in a set of professional values and principles mirrored through the Scottish Community Learning and Development Standards Council, and by significant literature on these topics (eg McArdle et al., 2024; Tett, 2010). Crucially, it is intended to be grounded in the learning needs of each cohort of students in our programme to ensure that they embody common egalitarian principles

11

for practice. Thus, sustaining a movement for social change and empowering social practices, becomes *their* future community development mission.

Freire (1996) posited the nature of hope through transformative action in communities in which community empowerment arises from emerging critical consciousness and informed action. In common with the ideals of university–community partnerships, critical pedagogy connects both to a community development mission and to an educational mission (Wallace, 2020). We subscribe to a challenging, creative, and rewarding critical pedagogy that seeks to ensure our teaching is future-proofed and that students are prepared to think reflexively about future challenges affecting them as practitioners *and* the grassroots communities in which they will engage. We do this in a shared spirit of love, care, and passion. Like Freire we see this as a mission rooted in hope.

References

Annala, J. Lindén, J. Mäkinen, M. & Henriksson, J (2023) Understanding academic agency in curriculum change in higher education, *Teaching in Higher Education,* 28:6, 1310-1327, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2021.1881772

Azzarito, L. (2023) 'Reimagining Education' in the Current Neoliberal Era: Creative Visual Methods for Social Change. In: Visual Methods for Social Justice in Education. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. Https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-257452_2

Beck, D and Purcell, R. (2020) *Community Development for Social Change*. New York: Routledge

Bender, G. (2008). Exploring conceptual models for community engagement at higher education institutions in South Africa. *Perspectives in Education*, 6(1), 81–95.

Bergan, S., & Harkavy, I. (2018). *Higher education for diversity, social inclusion and community*. Strasbourg: Council for Europe Publishing

Bok, D. (1984). *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social responsibilities in the modern university*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Braun, K. (2019). Unpacking post-truth. *Critical Policy Studies*, 13(4), 432–436

Brookfield, S. (1995) Changing the culture of scholarship to the culture of learning, in: T. Schuller (Ed.) *The Changing University?* (Buckingham, SRHE and Open University Press).

Choudry, A. (2020) Reflections on academia, activism, and the politics of knowledge and learning, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 24:1, 28-45, DOI: 10.1080/13642987.2019.163038

Coburn, A. & Wallace, D. (2011) *Youth Work: In Communities, and School*. Edinburgh, Dunedin.

Coburn, A., & Wallace, D. (2022) Critical Community Education: The Case of Love Stings, in Steinberg, S., & Down, B. (Eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Critical Pedagogies*, London: Sage

Coburn, A. & Gormally, S. (2019) Creating Educational Synergies. *Journal of Youth and Policy*. Retrieved on 8 October 2019 from https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/ creating-educational-synergies/

Coburn, A. & Gormally, S. (2017) *Communities for Social Change: Practicing Equality and Social Justice in Youth and Community Work*. New York, Peter Lang

Coffield, F., & Williamson, B. (2011). *From exam factories to communities of discovery – The democratic route.* London: Trentham

Community Learning and Development Standards Council (2017) The competent, critically reflective practitioner. Retrieved on 26 January 2024 from http://

cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/resources/thecompetences/the-competent-criticallyreflective-practitioner/

Crowther, J., Ackland, A,. Petrie, M., and Wallace, D. (2017) "Adult Education, community and learning for democracy in Scotland..." In *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Education*. (Ed). George Noblit. New York: Oxford University Press.

David, O. (2023) The Languaged Exterior and the Felt Interior: Undercurrents of Logocentrism within Practice-Led Research. CINDER. Http://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/cinder/article/view/1743 (accessed 2 April 2024)

Dewey, J. (1916*) Democracy and Education*. Teddington, Echo Library

Dewey, J. (1987). Education and social change. In J. A. Boydson (Ed.), *John Dewey: The later works* (Vol. 11; pp. 408–420). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP.

Douglas, S. (2012). Advancing the scholarship of engagement: An institutional perspective. *South African Review of Sociology*, 3(2), 27–39

Doring, A. (2002) Challenges to the Academic Role of Change Agent, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2002

Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin

Giroux, H. (2005). Border crossings. Oxford: Routledge

Giroux, H. (2015). *Education and the crisis of public values* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Peter Laing

Ginwright, S., & Commarota, J. (2007) Youth Activism in the Urban Community: Learning critical civic praxis within community organisations *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol 20, No 6, Nov-Dec 2007, pp 693-710

Griffin, D. (2014). *Education reform: the unwinding of intelligence and creativity*. New York, NY: Springer

Hooper, D. (2016). *Supporting thriving communities – The role of universities in reducing inequality.* London: University Alliance

Joseph Rowntree Trust, (2006), *Power to the people – the report of power: An independent inquiry into Britain's democracy.* York: York Publishing Distribution

Ledwith, M. (2001) Community work as critical pedagogy: re-envisioning Freire and Gramsci, *Community Development Journal, Vol.36, No 3. July 2001* pp. 171-182

Ledwith, M. & Springett, J. (2022) *Participatory Practice – Community- based practice for transformative change* (2nd Edition), Bristol: Policy Press

McArdle, K., Briggs, S., Forrester, K., & Garrett, E. (2024) *Community Work: Theory into Practice,* Bristol: Policy Press

McLaren, P. (2005) *Preface – A Pedagogy for Life*, in P. Freire Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach. Boulder, CO, Westview

Martin, I. (2008) *Reclaiming Social Purpose in Community Education – The Edinburgh Papers*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University

Mignolo, W. (2018) Foreword on Pluroversality and Multipolarity in Reiter, B. *The Pluriverse – The Geopolitics of Knowledge* 2018, Durham & London: Duke University Press

Nguyen, T & Walker, M. (2016) Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 2016, Vol 41, No. 1, 97-111, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.985632

Ord, J. (2009) Experiential learning in the UK: A return to Dewey. *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 28(4), 493–511

Rhéaume, J. (2022). Community Development and Empowerment: A Clinical Sociology Perspective. *Clinical sociology*, pp.65–82. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93695-2_5

Reiter, B. (2018) *The Pluriverse – The Geopolitics of Knowledge* Durham & London: Duke University Press

Rosales, J. (2012) Democracy as a way of life: Critical reflections on a Deweyan theme. *Res Publica: Revista de Filosofía Política*, 27, 155–165.

Scottish Community Learning and Development Standards Council (2024 (a)) The Competent Practitioner (downloaded 27/01/24) from The Competent, critically reflective practitioner | CLD Standards Council for Scotland

Scottish Community Learning and Development Standards Council (2024 (b)) Values of CLD (downloaded 03/02/24) Values of CLD | CLD Standards Council for Scotland

Scottish Government (2012) *Strategic Guidance for Community Planning Partnerships: Community Learning and Development Partnerships*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government

Scottish University Collective (2024) *Open Letter to Scottish Government Regarding CLD review 2024 Terms*,

Sommerlad, E. (2003) Theory, Research and Practice – the problematic appearance of pedagogy in post-compulsory education. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*. 8 (2)

Tett, L. (2010) *Community Learning and Development (3rd ed.)*. Edinburgh, Dunedin Academic Press

Tornberg, A. (2021) Prefigurative politics and social change: a typology drawing on transition studies *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 22:1, 83-107, DOI: 10.1080/1600910X.2020.1856161

University of the West of Scotland (2024) Strategy to 2025 – Shaping Society, (downloaded 27/01/24) from UWS Strategy 2025 (dixonwalter.co.uk)

Waisbord, S. (2018). The elective affinity between post-truth communication and populist politics. *Communication Research and Practice*, 4(1), 17–34.

Wallace, D. (2003) A Conceptual Framework for Practice, University of Strathclyde: Lecture Notes Unpublished

Wallace, D. (2017) Experience, democracy, community: Identifying with John Dewey through youth activism in Scotland. *Education in the North*, 24(1), 27–52.

Wallace, D. (2020), Identifying with borders and boundaries: the place of critical pedagogy as social responsibility education. in E Sengupta, P Blessinger & C Mahoney (eds), *University–Community Partnerships for Promoting Social Responsibility in Higher Education.* vol. 23, Innovations in Higher Education Teaching and Learning, vol. 23, Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 139-154. https://doi.org/10.1108/S2055-364120200000023010

Wallace, D. & Coburn, A. (2018) Community Education, in Bryce, T., Humes, W., Gillies D., &. Kennedy, A. (Eds) (2018) *Scottish Education (5th ed.).* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Zaunseder, A., Woodman, A,. and Emejulu, A. (2022) Introducing radical democratic citizenship: from practice to theory, *Identities*, 29:1, 1-8, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2021.2013670