

Inspirations

**Freire at the Ceilidh
Community dance as a training for dialogue**

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Stan worked with the Adult Learning Project from 1979 to 2011. On his retirement he agreed to share his inspirations with the readers of *Concept*.

In 1988/9 in Dalry, an old working class district in west Edinburgh, the Adult Learning Project (ALP) invited all the participants, and other local people to come together in a series of dialogues to create new programmes and actions through discussing “*Scotland and its people –What’s happening to us?*”

ALP’s experiment in implementing Freirian adult education and community development thus moved, with the people, into a new phase of development in the 1990’s, engaging with the national debate about the constitutional and cultural future of Scotland, and culminating in the establishment of a Scottish Parliament on the 1st of July 1999

Programmes and actions of Women’s Studies, Scots and Gaelic language studies, Writers workshops, Land issues, local and social history and a National photographic survey were rolled out.

As part of this process of decoding Scottish culture we examined indigenous means of cultural artistic expression and found that much of our traditional arts had undergone a kind of sustained cultural invasion and become degraded.

Many Scots people, having had their musical culture adopted and transformed firstly by the Queen at Balmoral and aped by the British aristocracy, and then Hollywoodised in movies and television, smelt the inauthenticity of what was presented for their consumption and turned their backs on it.

Following the 2nd World War the industrial working classes have adopted the values and practices of the global popular entertainment industry and become passive consumers of commodified art, and less and less producers of music song and dance in their own communities

“Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded: they begin to respond to the values, the standards and the goals of the invaders ... The more invasion is accentuated, and those invaded are alienated from the spirit of their own culture, the more the latter want to be like the invaders: to walk like them, dress like them, talk like them.” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Paulo Freire, Penguin 1972).

Thus all over the world young people turn their backs on indigenous art forms to ape American pop music, sing in American accents and reject community dancing in favour of individualistic “Bopping”

Important challenges to this increasing musical hegemony have come from folk musicians, the Beatles “English” Pop, and the Proclaimers singing pop song in their native Scots language.

ALP proposed to help reconnect people with their traditional music song and dance in ways that challenged the dominant ideas of individualism through the celebrity system and regain knowledge of and respect for the power these traditional practices.

We would set up a system of teaching, performing, and promoting to try to rediscover and remake our own musical culture. The Scots Music Group became a phenomenon in Popular Adult Education. Starting with 60 students in 4 classes in 1990, numbers more than doubled year on year until by 1999 more than 500 adults were attending classes in instrumental music song and dance.

Since the establishment of the ALP project in 1979, at the end of each phase of learning, or on significant calendar dates, the learners /activists and workers had celebrated the work done with social events, and parties, to make the education, as Freire encourages, “Always - always social” and as a way of sharing what we had discovered and created in the various learning groups. This sharing demonstrated that whatever theme we were collectively exploring, each group had a different sub-theme to contribute. Thus at a party during a study tour to the Highlands the land group would share discoveries of landlord oppression, the history group would discover the back ground, and the Gaelic language group would translate significant land features which related to these struggles. We encouraged poets, and musicians, amongst the participants, to perform and find appropriate work to illustrate what we were learning. We would create a “living code” in presentations and performance. We were learning “Authentic comradeship rather than false gregariousness”.

The in-house parties followed a natural pattern that is known in Gaelic culture as a “Ceilidh”, meaning a gathering in a house for gossip, storytelling, music, song and dance.

What we needed to do once the Scots music group was established was create larger social events which would involve the by now hundreds of ALP students but continue the sharing and dialogical ethos of these social events. We thought of Ceilidh Dances.

As part of the general cultural renewal, which was flowering in Scotland in the early 1990s, a small number of people across Scotland sought to reinvent community dancing in a more authentic manner, and we invited learner musicians and tutors to make a band for dancing. Community dances in larger halls seemed wholly appropriate to our organisation’s Freirian ethos. We then started to hold regular ceilidh dances in local community halls, have done so for 20 years now, and they perform vital community development and fundraising functions, for what has become the ALP Democratic Learning Community.

Since the 1950’s Community Dancing in Western society has diminished to such an extent that it is generally perceived as the preserve of a weird minority of eccentric hobbyists. It has been replaced by a general phenomenon of individual dancing in response to music, without reference to anyone else on the dance floor, or of course the mutation of dance music from the dance hall to the concert platform for passive consumption. Thus a participative community activity becomes commodified into a spectacle.

While doing your own thing has its own liberating aspect, the loss of competence in community dance seems very significant.

“They prefer gregariousness to authentic comradeship; they prefer the security of conformity with their state of unfreedom to the creative communion produced by freedom and even the very pursuit of freedom.” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* p. 47-48)

By Community dance I mean a group of people dancing the same bodily movement and patterns, in time with one another and the music: keeping together in time.

“Indeed community dancing is, like language, a capability that marks humans off from all other forms of life.” William H. McNeill *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and drill in Human History*.(ACLS POD)

In this work McNeill argues that community dancing made human groups more successful by encouraging co-operation translated into hunting and agriculture. He postulates a deep understanding of synergy and collectivism experienced in keeping time together.

“Words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused by the prolonged movement in unison. A sense of pervasive well being; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement: a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual.” (*Keeping Together in Time*)

All human societies have marked the calendar and celebrated rituals with Community dance. The Harvester vase from Minoan Crete in 1500 BC is one of the earliest known representations of Community dance, so we are losing something important and profoundly “Humanising” as we forget this powerful cultural expression.

Paulo Freire would have recognised that dancing together is part of being “Fully human”. In 1988 we put on a ceilidh in Dundee where Dr. Freire was working with community educators from across Scotland and after the dancing I had a conversation with him about the importance of community dance in Brazil and in particular “Forro” dancing in Northern Brazil. This was the dance of his region and he recognised the similarity and liberating aspects of our community dances. (20 years later I discovered that “Forro” was a corruption of “For All” signs with which the British railway company in the area encouraged workers to come to dances).

So what are the elements of the Ceilidh dance that have a resonance in the ideas of Paulo Freire?

“Dialogue is an encounter between men (humans), mediated by the world in order to name the world” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

Ceilidh dances invite the active participation of dancers in dialogue with each other, and between the dancers and the musicians. They encounter each other. All are engaged in the act of creation, in “naming the world”. The dialogue between the dancers first of all requires a responding to your partner, seeking a balance of weight, strength, competence and vigour. Experienced dancers teach and encourage the less experienced, and new dancers encourage a gentleness and care by the more experienced, and an equilibrium is reached.

“Through dialogue –a new term emerges teacher-student with student-teachers. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

The couple then has to be aware of all the other dancers, either simply to avoid crashing into them or in circle dances and group dances making complex patterns of movement. In ceilidh dances there is absolutely no hierarchy, they are organised so

that everyone gets a turn in taking the lead, and the dance is complete once everyone has done so. The group comes to understand that in order to make the dance flow every member must reach a level of competence that at least will not disturb the flow, and so much support and encouragement goes on. All the dancers are “subjects” not “objects” in this process.

“As the dancer loses himself in the dance, as he becomes absorbed in the unified community, he reaches a state of elation in which he feels himself filled with energy or force immediately beyond his ordinary state, and so finds himself able to perform prodigies of exertion.” A.R. Radcliffe-Brown *The Andaman Islanders* (Cambridge 1922) in McNeill.

The musicians and the dance caller can seem at first sight engaged in “Banking education” by simply issuing instructions for the crowd to follow and may seem at times authoritarian, but this is to miss the nature of the dialogical contract between them and the dancers. A band will be sensitive to the character of the dancers, their level of experience, their age, and adjust the programme and tempo accordingly. Experienced dancers will request particular dances and make demands of the band in terms of tempo and style of playing. The caller could be viewed as introducing the “theory” of the dance and the dancers as the “action” and the joint performance is the liberating “praxis” which through rhythmic muscular bonding and prolonged aerobic activity induces joyfulness.

Becoming skilled at community dancing is not easy! As Freire says of dialogue. “It is not a weekend on a tropical beach. It is hard but enjoyable work” As the dancers become more competent they start to express their own style and moves. Community dance satisfies what in self-determination theory are the three prerequisites for full humanity and happiness. Namely: Relatedness, Autonomy and Competence.

The revival and development of ceilidh dances in Scotland, particularly in the cities where the populations had almost wholly lost touch with indigenous art form, addresses the phenomenon Freire describes as “Cultural invasion”.

“In this phenomenon, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, and ignoring the potential of the latter, they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

Sometimes this invasion via global media is urbane, and covert, so that the relentless propaganda for, and air play of, American derived pop music, coupled with huge investment in production values (it’s slick and bright!) convinces the listener that this is the new and sexier way to go.

Sometimes all that is required, when most of our information comes through electronic media, is for indigenous music not to be given any air time and then the people forget about it and are unfamiliar and disconnected when they are exposed to it. Their aesthetic sense has been dulled and limited in the battle to sell them the latest sound. They have become “alienated from the spirit of their culture” (Freire)

“For cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

Sometimes the invasion is more aggressive and direct. In the 1940’s and 50’s Scottish dance music on the radio was very popular. The BBC, anxious to impose their own

bourgeois western values, side stepped the local traditional musicians, who they considered too wild and rough, and employed members of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra to re-make the music and introduce classical harmonies, under the musical direction of mainly western classical musicians. When they began to employ local musicians they insisted on a style of playing which reflected their aesthetic. If the musicians did not agree to “inhibit their creativity... by curbing their expression”, they were simply not employed or given airtime. Thus a generation of Scots folk accepted this amended and invaded form of their traditions and began to reproduce it.

The Dances, and the music for them, have evolved in a particularly Scottish idiom. They have, as Freire would say an intrinsic “Historicity” They are drawn from a carrying stream of traditions over many centuries. That is not to say the ceilidh dance revival is, like some heritage movements, a sort of cultural archaeology. The revival has encouraged some fusion with rock and other music and the dancers are developing new moves and dances within the authentic spirit of the dance.

The maintenance of these traditions, as well as an aesthetic process (‘we just like their power and vigour’), has been crucial for maintaining and developing a sense of identity in the community, and with migrants overseas, even when made less “authentic” as outlined above

Freire maintains, “Without a sense of identity there can be no real struggle”.

The role of folk music in struggles in Latin America has been profound. Folk singer Victor Jara for instance was so threatening to the regime in Chile that he was brutally murdered in 1973.

It is no coincidence therefore that the 1990s as well as a political reawakening in Scotland was also a cultural re-awakening and the development of Scottish community dancing was part of that. Young people engaged in that cultural and political process adopted and adapted ceilidh dancing in the period, took ownership as subjects, and transformed the invaded dance form. In this period also young men re-invented the wearing of the kilt - often despised as a symbol of conservatism and in the ownership of the Scottish aristocracy - and made it ‘cool’ and a symbol of the movement towards autonomy. The kilt and ceilidh dance are now considered essential at weddings, and other community celebrations.

Throughout the 90s as demand for, and creation of, a Scottish Parliament grew, so we witnessed a huge revival of community dancing at ceilidh dances. Voluntary organisations and political movements were consolidated and sustained at these dances, many of which took place at political rallies and gatherings. It was no surprise then that the opening of the Scottish parliament was marked by a great ceilidh dance held for all the new MSPs in the historic Assembly Rooms in Edinburgh’s George Street. (George Street!! Oh the irony).

The music for that dance was played by the Robert Fish Band, formed at ALP in the white heat of cultural action

Of course a dance revival does not a revolution make, but we see from examples of cultural resistance in other parts of the world, the crucial political role traditional and folk arts have had in maintaining identity in the face of cultural invasion and political domination. During the 1990s in Afghanistan, the post-Soviet and Taliban governments banned instrumental music and much public music making. In spite of

arrests and destruction of musical instruments, musicians have continued to ply their trade into the present. This echoes with the burning of fiddles by fundamentalist ministers in many parts of Scotland in the 19th century. Indeed one unknown Shetland fiddler's response was to compose a dance tune "Deil stick da Minister"

"Cultural action, as historical action, is an instrument for superseding the dominant alienated and alienating culture. In this sense every authentic revolution is a cultural revolution" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

Community Ceilidh dancing has not won over the whole population. In a celebrity pop-obsessed culture; panting for the newest fad, it is viewed as an anachronism. Embarrassed by the close contact with strangers and the uninhibited joyfulness of the dance, metropolitan sophisticates display their "internalisation of the oppressor" by dismissing the practice as childlike and culturally insignificant. The bourgeois spectator is frightened by the invitation to lose himself in the dance.

A quotation from a leading leftist middle class British thinker on social life and sexuality in the early 20th century is revealing here.

"The participants in a dance, as all observers of savages have noted, exhibit a wonderful unison; they are, as it were fused into a single being, stirred by a single impulse. Social unification is thus accomplished. Apart from war, this is the chief factor making for social solidarity in primitive life; it was indeed the best training for war" Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life* (Boston 1923) from McNeill

While enthusing about the role of dance and social solidarity, despite his leftist credentials, it's clearly not for him, as he would not consider himself either savage or primitive,

As I play for the dance, I like to imagine Paulo and Nita Freire, whose love for each other was palpable and physical, taking to the floor and losing themselves in a wild and unbridled foursome reel. They would recognise dialogue, cultural authenticity, cultural synthesis, relatedness, praxis, humanity, love and joy in the process.

For nought can cheer the heart sae weel
 As can a canty Highland reel;
 It even vivifies the heel
 To skip and dance:
 Lifeless is he wha canna feel its influence.

Let mirth abound; let social cheer
 Invest the dawnin' o' the year;
 Let blythesome innocence appear,
 To crown our joy;
 Nor envy, wi' sarcastic sneer,
 Our bliss destroy.

From "The Daft-Days"
 Robert Fergusson 1750- 1774