

Review:

Never Give Up! Putting Campaigning Back Into Community Education

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It was clear from the full house that campaigning strikes a chord with those engaged in community education either as practitioners or as activists. The seminar provided an opportunity for communities of place and interest to open up the campaigning debate. There was a great lively atmosphere and the feel of an activist rally. I was seated at a table with students, activists and educators where fuelled by tea and biscuits we had some great discussions. Throughout the day I was engrossed not only in the speakers' stories but also in the experiences of the people I sat with, offering opportunities to share what works.

Over the course of the day we heard from a range of activists with one uniting feature, essentially their fight for human rights. The speakers were explicit in politicising the context of community as we heard about the barriers faced by social housing residents, service users and young people. The difficulties were contrasted by the effectiveness of campaigning giving the seminar a sense of hope. The seminar's title suggests that campaigning has become marginalised, possibly for being too overtly political, but the strong presence today showed us we should never count it out.

The speakers of the day were fantastic, first was Jo McFarlane, part of the successful campaign to change advocacy rights in the 2003 Scottish Mental Health Act. Jo opened the seminar with two of her own poems about people power. I felt this sent the message that today represented the heart of a community, the people and their fight for social justice. Next we heard from Stuart Moir who spoke of the barriers to collectivism and gave name to the unfortunate bogey man of the day, managerialism: a particularly 21st century bureaucracy appearing in different guises. There were murmurs of recognition as meetings about meetings and key performance indicators were mentioned. Stuart also spoke of a professional culture clash where workers with non community backgrounds have pivotal roles in community work. This was identified as a flash point as different professions bring different agendas.

Lynn McCabe, Anna Hutchinson and Ian Moore represented the socialist activist North Edinburgh Social History Group who reminded us of some important messages, namely to make time building relationships and to listen to the communities we work with. These two things are often first to be sidelined when following the 'proper channels', another example of the dreaded managerialism. Anna described how she relishes in the label 'troublemaker', liberation not containment sometimes means breaking the rules. This was a reminder to hold onto the commitment to collaboration in order to avoid institutionalisation. Ian, a proud lifelong socialist spoke about the state's structural prescription, it being non-dialectic, the antithesis of true community work. Ian described the theorisation of community action, and reminded us to commit to the action part. There is a risk we have become passive consumers of crisis, think

of the London riots where we witnessed 24 hour rolling news coverage. Some have become disconnected from their community by the individualisation effect of capitalism. Young people were demonised in the media, a focus on their 'choice' to loot being presented in a vacuum of context, with no mention of their environment and the wider impact of consumerism.

This link to young people led onto Daya Feldwick's experiences in the struggle to get a skate-park built in Midlothian. From my background in anti racist youth work I was interested in hearing more about young people's activism. Daya described a breakdown in the project coming from a lack of consultation with the community of interest; the young people, a classic example of top down prescription. This was a snapshot of a work in progress and Daya made clear her commitment to keep young people as the agents of change proves we are representative.

Sasha Callaghan and George Lamb described their campaigning experiences, and I was introduced to November's Disability History Month Scotland. This was a great aspect of the day, being introduced not only to new people but new campaigns too and helping to build a sense of solidarity. The diversity of campaigns being represented continued with Tommy Kane, a public sociologist. Tommy brought a different perspective to campaigning. Tommy encouraged campaigners to access technology and experts, something made possible by the Freedom Of Information act. Next was a panel discussion chaired by Mae Shaw and consisting of Anne O'Donnell, mental health activist, Fiona Menzies, from Communities Against the Cuts and Eurig Scandrett, environmental researcher and activist. The panel continued the theme of bringing their own experiences of campaigning and some interesting points were made about community work in general; again the idea of collectivism and unity were essential.

So, did we manage to discover the secret to put campaigning back into community education? I would say yes. Despite the obstacles there remains a strong commitment to collectivism. This process lies at the heart of community education theory and practice, but has become increasingly complex through bureaucratic webs. As is often the case a return to our roots holds the clue, a refocusing on the foundations of collaboration and communication can get activism back on the map. As I listened to the speakers one aspect of practice became clear, the ever decreasing opportunity to communicate. My colleagues and I enjoy an article based discussion group once a month. I use 'enjoy' in the loosest possible sense here, but something the imaginatively titled 'article club' gives us is time to talk and confirm why we do what we do. Listening to the experiences of constraints in the seminar contextualised how unique and essential the learning from our small group is. I took great inspiration from the speakers and their struggle to be heard, it was an opportunity to connect the personal to the political. I left with not only some good quotes for the now famous article club, but also with a feeling of solidarity in my community of practice. The seminar brought together a mix of activists, academics, and educators to get campaigning back in action; this was, to quote Scott Fraser, good for our collective emotional well-being!

Some inspiring campaigns were represented and the discussions happening in and around today's main event motivated me to get out and campaign.