

Theory and Practice: A Student's Reflections on Their Learning on a Community Education Degree Programme.

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Foreword

This article has been adapted from the notes of a presentation given by Thomas as part of an assessment for a 3rd year course on the BA in Community Education at the University of Edinburgh. In it Thomas identifies and explores a number of relevant key tensions in the field and discusses how his learning across the programme of study and his engagement with literature has helped him make sense of these tensions. It is a personal reflection on his professional development as a Community Educator, but it also makes some useful insights that the editorial board thought would be of interest to a wider audience.

Stuart Moir, Editor

Introduction

In this article I will highlight what I have learned throughout the last three years of my degree course. The article will highlight both the literature, which has been provided for study, and how such literature has helped me in my professional practice placements.

Educational values and purposes

At the beginning of my studies I was introduced to the concept of 'community' and community education. I learned that community could be defined in many different ways. This was highlighted by Hillery (1955) who identified 94 different definitions for the word. At this point in my studies it was beginning to become clear that if communities could be so varied, then the role of a community educator must also be varied. This was a good starting point for the rest of the degree program as it began to frame some of the challenges which I would face in becoming a professional community educator. In order to provide an ideological background to the role of community education, I studied the antecedents of community education as described

by Tett (2010). This described the origins of community education and identified two distinct traditions, that being the 'respectable' and the 'radical' traditions.

I learned that the respectable tradition was instigated to ameliorate the growing problem of mass migration of people from the countryside to the major cities to look for work in the factories and work houses, which had proliferated as a result of the industrial revolution. At this time many employers were concerned with the conduct of their potential workforce – a particular concern was having sober and responsible workers – and sought ways of educating them to become more productive workers. This type of paternal approach to education is exemplified by Robert Owen in his mills in New Lanark, where he increased the working day from 13 to 14 hours, thus providing less time for drunkenness. However Owen also saw the value of a healthy and educated work force, such a work force being more productive and therefore creating more wealth for their employer (Tett, 2010)

With regards to the radical tradition of community education I learned that this sprung up from the people themselves and was driven by a desire to enlighten workers to the exploitative practices of employers. This type of radical approach to education was identified as the beginning of the trades union movement as well as organisations such as the Workers Educational Association (WEA), which sought to educate workers to question the status quo and readdress the power imbalance, which existed between the employers and workers. By studying the roots of community education in such a way, I was able to identify some of the reasons why I wanted to become a community educator. After examining the antecedents of community education and its different traditional purposes, I read C. Wright Mills (1959), which for me summed up the purpose of community education: to connect private troubles with public issues; in other words to work with people in order to help them to identify why things on a local level are happening and relate that to the national and international level of policy and discourse which directly affects peoples everyday lives.

The nature of community

Having learned about the history, values and purposes of community education, I then began to learn about the different types of communities which exist and the different

challenges they present to any potential community educator. As I pointed out earlier, ‘community’ has many definitions and therefore many different needs. Communities are not simply entities, which can be labelled and pigeonholed, but are living and ever changing organisms. MacGregor (2001) points out that some communities can be described as ‘problematic’ if they are not meeting the standards desired by those in power. At first sight this would appear to be a straightforward proposition, but as mentioned earlier the role of a community educator is to connect local problems to the greater political landscape. By reading MacGregor’s paper on the problematic community I was able to identify some of the reasons why certain communities suffer problems of multiple deprivation, and begin to link these problems to policy.

The nature of the community education task.

At this point in my studies I realised that if communities were so varied then the roles, which a community educator must assume would also be varied. Ann Toomey (2011) makes a strong case for such an assumption when she identifies eight potential roles that practitioners adopt whilst working with communities. However it is important to note that Toomey urges caution when adopting any educational role within a community, as the effects can be long lasting and not always positive for a community. Thus it is imperative that the work which is being carried out is what the community desire and not simply a response to policy. Several readings from my studies helped me to grasp this concept. Biesta (2006) highlights the problem of requiring people to learn what is prescribed as beneficial to them, without asking people what their interests are and what they may want to learn. This fails to position the learner at the centre of their learning and responding to their needs.

At this point in my studies I read what Antonio Gramsci (1986) wrote on hegemony, which I found both interesting and exhilarating. The concept of hegemony is the way Gramsci explained how the capitalist class maintains their power by convincing people that the existing social relations are the natural and only way to organise things, even if this goes against the interests of the majority of people. This reading helped me to understand the extent of the forces of power that were at work, shaping all of our lives on a day-to-day basis – forces which Mills (1959) postulates most members of society are blind to. At this point I thought I had all the answers as to

what I would be doing in practice, however when I went on my first professional practice placement, it became clear that wanting to educate in a certain way does not always mean that it will happen.

Constraints of and on practice.

My first placement was in the statutory sector with a local authority Community Learning and Development team. On this placement I was able to witness the frustration felt by practitioners about policy and ideology that led to funding cuts at local government level. Many of the services, which were run by the team had been dropped due to funding cuts which had been passed from national government to local government. Indeed I attended a meeting where managers asked the team of practitioners to identify which areas of provision they thought should be cut. I was pleased when the team refused to take part in this consultation, stating that all areas of provision were imperative. This situation reminded me of a paper by Wallace (2009) that described how communities were being governed at a distance, by prescribed funding and provision, whilst leaving the communities and those who work with them to bear the brunt of the cuts.

Fraser (2012) also covered this point in his paper on community development and the politics of local government. Whilst on placement I developed a greater understanding of this controlling discourse, which was to the fore in shaping such policies. Discussing social exclusion, Levitas (2005) describes a 'moral underclass discourse', which seeks to demonise the poorest in our society. This discourse chimes perfectly with what Heywood (2012) describes as Neoliberalism – withdrawal of the state in supporting individuals and communities and placing an emphasis on self-reliance. Neoliberal policy could also be identified by the push for communities to take over and run community centres for themselves, with workers being asked to find suitable candidates within the community to form management committees. The underlying inference here is that, if the community could not run them, they would close.

Having experienced the statutory sector, my second placement was with an independent voluntary organisation with charitable status. However, despite the organisation's title, they were also reliant on state funding for much of their work.

This threw up a paradox for the organisation that ran a course of prescribed sessions designed to help young adults into employment. Although attendance was described as voluntary, the fact that a wage was paid for attendance negated the voluntary principle. According to Jeffs and Smith (2010), Voluntary attendance and the freedom to negotiate a curriculum is fundamental to good youth work practice, as it separates formal and in-formal learning.

Running alongside the employability skills sessions were drop in youth groups, which were entirely voluntary. These groups were person centred and responded to the needs of the learner. The best example of this was the music café that allowed young people to take part in different music lessons, and was a great example of a community of interest. However this situation created a paradox for the organisation, as it relied on the funding from the state for the employment skills group to help cover the cost of the voluntary youth groups. This situation reminded me of what Meade and Shaw (2011) described as ‘the maintenance of democracy by the agency of the critical and creative citizen’. On one hand there were young people being encouraged to write song lyrics, which they felt expressed their desires for the future of society, whilst on the other hand a group were being told that what was prescribed to them was the only answer. This situation reinforced the fact that as a community worker it was vital to have a deep understanding of what I would be asked to ‘deliver’ and why.

Appropriate Educational Roles

Being on placement helped me to understand many of the challenges faced by both the statutory and voluntary sectors involved in community education. This led me to think about what type of educational role a community educator would be legitimate in developing. The answer to this lies in who the educational role is to benefit. If we accept Jeffs and Smith’s (2010) argument about legitimacy through voluntary participation and a negotiated curriculum, then it would appear to be a simple matter. However, when working with groups in the community, a drive towards instant success evidenced by outcomes can make life much more difficult.

This type of work was highlighted by Tania de St Croix (2008) in her speech to the federation for detached youth work, in which she describes the detrimental effects of

outcome driven provision and how recording information on participants created a barrier between them and workers. Smith (2009) offers an alternative to this approach. He describes how person-centred community education can begin with a conversation and lead to lasting social change which can benefit a whole community. He highlights that education is not just delivering skills but also something which connects people to their community. These alternative views explain the paradox experienced in the organisation.

Changing Policy Context

What was clear from both of my placements was the fact that, for a community educator, an understanding of the changing political landscape, and changing policies is essential. This is essential, not only for my understanding of policy, but would be vital in providing explanations to community members where necessary. I feel it is my responsibility as a potential community educator to not only study and understand the policy context, but to be able to help communities to identify alternatives. From my academic study I gained a greater understanding of what lies behind the current policy context. This understanding was greatly enhanced by reading papers by Taylor-Gooby (2011) on the restructuring of the welfare state, and Clarke and Newman's (2012) paper on the current austerity measures being deployed by the current UK government.

In conclusion, I have found this course to be both interesting and challenging. I began by worrying about how to use computers, whilst thinking that because I had just completed an HNC in Working with Communities, I knew a lot about the academic side of the degree. On reflection, I was wrong about computers, and wrong about the academic challenges. I can use computers – it was merely a question of trying. Whilst academically, I have had to work very hard to gain an understanding of how diverse and complex the role of a community educator can be.

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