

Review

Concept Seminar: “Political Education – Before and After the Referendum” Edinburgh, Friday 28th March 2014.

Attended by around 50 people, a mixture of council Community Learning & Development workers, voluntary groups, students and academics, this event featured four main presentations about work in the field of political education for different age groups and communities. The referendum was considered from the point of view of *“the problems it raises in terms of curriculum and teaching as well as some of the new and unique opportunities it opens up for political education”*.

Jim Crowther introduced proceedings by reminding us of Paolo Freire’s dictum that *“education is never neutral”* and envisioned *“permanently sceptical citizens”* as the desirable outcome from political education. Despite the “diminished” nature of the current referendum debate, centred around a dismal costing exercise, the apparent groundswell of interest places the fundamental question of what kind of society we are and want to become firmly in the frame – an unprecedented opportunity to refresh and reconfigure the usually constrained terms of political debate.

Will Golding, Political Literacies Project Worker for Edinburgh Council, perceives his task as being to bridge the gap between the powerful and the powerless. Through a series of thematic workshops, he had engendered interest amongst youth and community groups by seeking the connection between personal lives and the political. Reservoirs of creativity, enthusiasm and off-the-wall thinking had been evinced by his unconventional, multi-media approach and Golding’s own jack-in-the-box energy explained how his work had been the catalyst for engagement amongst those previously outside the debate. He interposed a range of provocative slogans and catch-phrases, summed up in the optimistic signature line of *“making anger hopeful”*.

Callum McLeod, a member of the Broughton High School based CLD team spoke of his own introduction to the CLD world via involvement in Local Agenda 21

environmental education. Echoing Will Golding's enthusiasm, but in a more down-to-earth style, he elaborated on the recent and ongoing Democracy project - featuring issues arising from the referendum debate - in which he and his team had blended the school curriculum with a distinctive CLD approach, to eager participation from his contact groups. McLeod several times mentioned his aim as being to produce "a pile (sic) of young activists", a notion which prompted much discussion in the subsequent group session (what do we expect activists to do?, how do they form a pile?..).

A more mainstream curricular approach was represented by Jenny Lindsay, Modern Studies Teacher and poetry workshop facilitator. She raised the challenging question of the requirement for neutral presentation in the teacher's role; particularly testing in her case as she has a personal commitment to one side of the referendum question (she didn't declare which, at least on this occasion). She gave practical examples of how she had maintained this balance, using the "some think x, while others favour y" response to leading questions from her students. Some of the educational opportunities arising from the debate in the classroom include studying research methods, undertaking mini-surveys, analysing political language and critiquing campaign videos. Drama, creative writing and multi-media arts are providing and benefitting from a two-way stimulus in addressing the exigent questions of nationhood, identity and community. Lindsay concluded with the day's only reference to Curriculum for Excellence, intriguingly leaving trailing the opinion that "*it has great potential but we've bottled it, or at least part of it*".

Last up was Alex Wood, billed here as an Adult Education Tutor, but better known to those of a certain vintage as the all too short-lived radical Labour leader of Edinburgh Council in the mid-1980s. Wood had lost none of his fervour, and still exhibited the panache of the politician unconstrained by party purdah, combining sharp analysis and open-mindedness. Wood's adult education work had led him in a range of directions, including a passionate interest in genealogy, but he had more recently been invited to lead adult education classes on the referendum topic. Again, the question of neutrality had to be confronted: Wood's approach was to take a contrarian position to

the most opinionated of his students and encourage them to challenge their preconceptions. The confluence of identity with social/political attitudes is the recurrent theme of his classes' discussion and it has proved especially fruitful as a stimulus to learning and self-expression. One particularly interesting aid Wood had deployed in these classes had been to compare national constitutions, with unexpected and contrasting results, proving a useful conduit in stimulating debate about the Scottish case.

The subsequent group and plenary discussions shot off at a number of tangents, as several of those present drifted into well-rehearsed political positions. The nature of activism in the community emerged as a key theme, with the potential for the current debate acting as a route by which, youth groups in particular, move on from single-issue or identity politics to a broader engagement in civic and national issues. Following the outcome of the referendum, we wondered, would discussion within communities continue and grow, or would it be dissipated? The kinds of work undertaken in the case studies presented hold out the hope for building a more sustained engagement.

While this was a lively and largely optimistic event, a shadow was cast on learning that two of the presenters are now, or soon to be, at the end of their contracts, leaving doubt about the sustainability of such initiatives and the commitment of national and local government to community learning generally, a concern all too familiar to those working in other parts of the sector. Given the topic, it also seemed odd that few linkages to Curriculum for Excellence were made, given its aim "to achieve a transformation in education in Scotland" a process running concurrent with the focus on our distinctiveness as a nation. CfE surely has the potential to become a platform for promoting referendum-inspired political education, but only if skilled CLD workers are in place to facilitate the process. Likewise, the CLD role in community planning, highlighted in the Strategic Guidance paper, could channel the growing civic engagement the referendum debate has stimulated to make community planning a truly participative and meaningful process.

A worthwhile event, then, but one whose subject needs to be part of the discussion outwith this almost entirely Edinburgh-based audience. From a CLD point of view, it was also a rather frustrating reminder that, at a time when there has never been a greater need for CLD to fulfil its role as catalyst and facilitator in broadening and deepening the democratic process, the capacity of our service continues to be depleted and overstretched. The arguments for turning around this lamentable missed opportunity are compelling; our pressing task is to build the case until the penny drops.

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