

Political Education in Scotland: A Practitioner's Perspective

*This article is based on an input to a Concept seminar on political education in 2015. It describes work the author was involved in whilst working as a literacies practitioner for the City of Edinburgh Council. **Neil Saddington** is currently an Adult Literacies and Numeracy worker for Midlothian Council.*

By way of introduction, in the build up to the Referendum on Scottish Independence in 2014, I was involved in different bits and pieces of political education work with young people; looking at the issues that were important or personal to them (politics with a small p) and how that connected to governments, policies and decision making (politics with a capital P). For example, a group of young people with specific learning difficulties made connections between issues like bullying, prejudice and discrimination and whether or not there would be greater equality of opportunity if Scotland ruled its own affairs.

Also, in my work as an adult literacies development worker and tutor, there was much discussion, dialogue and debate with learners in the lead up to the Referendum, and many learners attended pre-Referendum events. At these events they had the chance to try and make sense of what was at stake, and this involved looking at issues like who has the power and who decides in relation to Westminster (UK Parliament) and Holyrood (Scottish Parliament).

Before talking about my post-Referendum work, I want to address the question of what I learnt from the Referendum experience in relation to my own professional role. In the main, I learnt how the Referendum opened up politics to both young people and adult learners who had previously felt so disenfranchised by politics. I was used to hearing statements like 'I don't do politics, it's not for me' or 'I dinnae understand that rubbish'. However, the yes/no vote seemed to change that for lots of the folk that

I worked with and, as a worker, that brought me great excitement and opened up new and different spaces to engage with people around subjects that were of personal importance to them. These could range from the length of time it takes to get a Doctor's appointment to the bedroom tax, or the lack of real employment opportunities for young people. At a time when the predominant policy focus of adult education is on 'employability', the danger is that individuals are viewed simply as economic units, and that all learning is connected to making a living. However, the Referendum created opportunities to do something different; to reconnect personal experience to public issues of structure, and this was much more about learning for living as opposed to a more narrow employment focus on learning for *a* living.

The idea of *meso* level of reality - the space where policy from above (macro level) connects and impacts upon communities and people on the ground at the micro level – is a very useful way of understanding how local communities experience policy and politics.

For me, the Referendum opened up micro, macro and meso levels of power and influence in a way that allowed learners the space to try to get to grips with complex subjects, ideas, policies and language in a way that made sense. It may have been just a 'yes' or 'no' vote, but it raised questions, issues, hopes and fears. Most importantly, it created dialogue, discussion and differences of opinion, and it showed that there was an appetite for politics even amongst those who had previously felt so far removed from it. The Referendum was an exciting time to be involved in community education as it offered up real opportunities for learners to make connections between politics and their day to day lives.

It also opened up the prospect of transformative change and, whilst some learners wanted to consider that, others were more wary and cautious. One of the things that attracted me to adult education in the first place was its historical roots in social purpose, critical thinking and its capacity to bring about social change. The Referendum created a buzz of excitement, and the prospect of potential changes that could lead to greater levels of social justice played a big part in that.

Fast forward to October 2014 and, whilst the Referendum had come and gone, myself and a few colleagues felt that the excitement and interest in politics it had generated shouldn't be allowed to slide. Allied to that, learners were still talking about the vote, and we also knew that the Smith Commission was on its way with the promise of more devolved powers for Scotland. At the same time, the City of Edinburgh Council was actively encouraging its citizens to 'have their say' on how the Council should spend its budget and, in turn, make savings – or cuts!. There was also the prospect of the 2015 General Election. So at the time, it felt that there were lots of opportunities and possibilities for political education work.

Some of this happened organically through adult literacies learners wanting help to understand the Council's budget planner tool. This led to them wanting their voices, opinions and concerns to be heard. So they wrote letters to their Councillors and MSPs, along with inviting Councillors to come and meet them to discuss what cuts potentially might be made to care, education and health. These were all adult learners who had previously been very removed from active citizenship, but here they were raising their voices and participating. Of course the exercise raised issues about consultation processes, including the budget planner tool itself, and what participation really means. But, for people who had in the past chosen not to get involved in politics at all, there seemed to be a definite sea change in attitude.

At this point my colleagues and I felt that this was the right moment to look into putting on a Post-Referendum event that gave adult learners the chance to look back and reflect on their Referendum experience, whilst also looking at the Smith Commission and proposed changes in powers for Scotland. This event highlighted a real level of interest in politics amongst a core group of learners and led to a 6 week taster course called the Politics and Democracy Group. Due to my contract with city of Edinburgh Council coming to an end, it was shorter than intended, which was a drawback as much more time and depth is needed to cover the complex issues, language and systems of politics. However, during the course, we looked at political timelines, recent previous General and Scottish Parliament election results, and who

has powers to bring forward and pass which Bills. Group exercises around powers, laws and bills led to the learners wanting to find out more about the Scottish Parliament and how it works.

Thanks to the engagement officers at the Scottish Parliament, the group got to sit in on and observe Parliamentary debates. They also got the chance to have a meeting with the SNP MSP, Marco Biagi, to find out how he became an MSP, and pose questions to him about health care, benefits, poverty and adult education. Again, this course and the areas it covered helped the learners involved make important connections between private troubles and public issues. In terms of opportunities for political education work, both now and in the future, there is plenty of scope in the build up to next year's Scottish Parliament Elections. Also, the current climate of austerity, benefits sanctions, cuts and poverty lends itself to more sustained educational work around these themes.

Finally, looking at what can hinder and help this work, I would say lack of time due to circumstances, hindered the Politics and Democracy course. For literacies learners, complex language, structures and systems all need to be broken down into tasks and activities that folk can understand. Whilst it was only a taster course, it felt like we only began to scratch the surface. So my advice is to allow plenty of time! The top-down language of both politics and power can be a big turn off for some folk, so work has to be done to ensure the learning is relevant to real life, and that people can make connections between their lives and the world of politics. I also think that the tensions between an individual worker's stance, values, principles and the organisation they work for, can hinder this kind of work, in that it may put workers in a difficult position around issues like neutrality. In terms of what can help political education work, I think making good connections with other workers and organisations is really crucial, as is being in the right place at the right time, such as seizing on the increase in interest in politics that the Referendum brought about.