

Creating Space For Thinking Together

Concept Seminar and launch of *Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners*

**Community Engagement: What's the Problem?
22 September 2017
University of Edinburgh**

Reflections on the day from three participants: Diann Govenlock, Emma Crawshaw & Gary Fraser

Diann Govenlock

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The purpose of this afternoon gathering was to celebrate the launch of *Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners*. The event was well attended by a diverse group of practitioners, activists, academics and students, all bearing their own understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing contemporary community engagement, and all willing to listen to the thoughts and views of others. This Guide is a timely resource and makes an excellent contribution to the field of practice; it has the potential to play a major role in helping us unpack the challenge we face to foster the type of community engagement that can help us to address some of the inequalities within our communities. The Guide can be used in its entirety to encourage dialogue and discussion or as stand-alone sessions. As well as being a really useful resource for those working with community groups, it also challenges practitioners to bring a critical lens to the nature of their own practice.

The Seminar provided a much-needed opportunity for us to come together to listen, talk and think. There were several varied and interesting inputs on different aspects of community engagement from personal to political. The gathering provided us with an opportunity to consider what community engagement means. It's a popular term in today's society and increasingly attractive to a range of organisations. It could be said

that the idea of community engagement has entered popular culture in general. The seminar allowed us the time and space to discuss in small groups Community Engagement – what’s the problem? What’s its purpose? Who is part of the community and who is not? Who benefits and who does not? As you would expect, this brought more questions than answers. The importance of these events is not to deliver an answer, but rather to reignite our enthusiasm to critique both theory and practice.

The predicament is that thinking time is not ‘cool’, and working in the field of Community Learning and Development (CLD), finding or making the time and space to think and reflect becomes ever more difficult. Increasing demands and capacity of staff means that what is lost is the most valuable: time to think and reflect. Opportunities and the space to learn from each other are few and far between, yet are so crucial to our role as educators. There are limited opportunities to network with CLD practitioners beyond the walls of the local authority. We need to shake off the shackles and make the time and space to engage with each other as well as with the individuals and communities with whom we work. Being a reflective practitioner is not a luxury but a necessity, both to ‘up’ our game and for the benefit of our communities.

Across Scotland, local authorities have faced major structural changes and Community Learning and Development has been no exception, often being subsumed into other departments. This still happens as we speak, which makes it even more crucial to hold on to the value of CLD – as an approach and as a philosophy. The level of interest in the *Concept* seminar demonstrates that CLD is alive and kicking, still there, still representing our values and ethos, our principles and passions.

Emma Crawshaw

CEO

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The *Concept* Seminar ‘Community Engagement: What’s the Problem?’ challenged me to consider context more deeply and to think critically about how the choices we make in how we take up the position of practitioner or leader in engaging with people in communities can serve or subvert democratic processes and rights.

I work for Crew, a public health charity committed to reducing harm and stigma associated with psycho-stimulant (eg Cocaine, Cannabis, and MDMA) drug use. Crew’s grown from a group of ‘loved-up club bunnies’ on the rave scene to a volunteer-led organisation, to our current mixed professional and volunteer team. Crew’s foundations are in collective action to challenge ‘moral panic’ and misleading media advice about ‘dance’ drug use and a lack of treatment, education and support options for people using them, which we think of as rights.

Jo MacFarlane’s poem, read at the seminar, ‘A Lesson in the Making’, captured with economy, beauty and acuity how ‘engagement’ or official inquiry with power can constrain and silence legitimate and potentially generative dissent: “...*rectifying righteous anger with reviews*”. Hearing this reminded me not only of my own experiences of being “rectified”, but also that taking up a role as leader, or practitioner, or finding oneself feeling thankful to be 'at the table' in meetings or partnership with agencies or individuals with more power or status than ourselves should never be a reason to feel obliged to perpetuate processes which constrain or neutralise open discussion, the offer of an alternative approach and genuine engagement.

Recent democratic processes appear to have delivered a series of ‘shocks’ in that people could be seen to have voted against their own and wider common interests,

perhaps to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo (Rachel Reeves quoted in Facing the Unknown, a Fabian Society Policy Report, 2016)). Are we ‘shocked’ because we honestly thought everything was alright, or because we’ve become too comfortable, “blinded by our own privilege” to the lack of justice, equality and cohesion across communities? (Gerry Hassan, quoting a leadership coach in Scottish Review, 20th September 2017).

Jim Crowther talked about Gramsci's idea of an interregnum: a period of struggle at the end of one age and the start of a new one. “Morbid symptoms” of this turmoil, like the election of Trump, or people appearing to be mobilised to vote, apparently without thinking about their wider collective interests, may also be seen as signifying the possibility and necessity of change: nothing is inevitable any longer, even if it does feel like “everything's on fire”.

Taking up the position of practitioner or leader involves holding power, and in a context where increasing, ongoing state financial constraints for education and other vital services are so familiar as to seem inevitable, people we work with, practitioners and managers often find themselves encouraged or required to think about communities being responsible for finding their own solutions to complex social problems. A transfer of responsibility isn't always associated with the transfer of power or meaningful resources, however, so the seminar and associated guide: *Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners* were a critical reminder of the importance of always asking ourselves ‘who is this for?’ ‘Whose interests does it serve?’ ‘What can shift the balance of power towards justice?’.

Gary Fraser

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The seminar entitled ‘Community Engagement – What’s the Problem?’ met during a period of interesting times for those involved in community engagement/community development work.

In Scotland, there has been renewed governmental interest in our field of practice with a raft of policies introduced by the Scottish Government framed around themes such as community engagement, community empowerment and co-production. According to one speaker, a distinctively ‘Scottish approach’ to community development had emerged with ‘policy as supportive now as it’s ever been’. The seminar was told that new statutory rights for communities had also been introduced; for example, Community Empowerment legislation enabled communities to own and acquire assets, coupled with new rights for them to be involved in the planning, design and delivery of public services. Much of this sounded positive and, on the surface, the new legislation sounded like the most progressive community engagement/development policy in Europe.

And yet – as the Seminar’s theme suggested, we have a problem! Listening to the various speakers and group discussions, I came to the view that it is not one problem but rather a series of issues which are complex and multi-faceted. In particular, governmental concerns with community engagement beg the questions ‘why now’ and ‘on whose terms’? For me the empowerment agenda needs to be situated within a context shaped by unprecedented spending cuts to local government and the third sector; cuts which look likely to continue until well into the 2020s. Community development professionals are on the front-line of these cuts, and the Seminar was told that the reality facing working class communities was not ‘community empowerment’ but the loss of essential services as cash-starved Councils struggle in

vain to balance their books. In this context, Community Empowerment legislation was described by one speaker as a way of ‘providing public services on the cheap’ and facilitating the retreat of the state as a provider of public goods and services. In addition, guest speakers and those who shared their thoughts in group discussions talked of a fragmentation of traditional community education/community learning and development services and how the work was increasingly dominated (and hijacked) by the employability agenda. A pernicious culture of managerialism and its accompanying obsession with targets and measuring performance was also mentioned, creating new sets of tensions between practitioners and management.

Despite these problems, there were also grounds for optimism, with speakers talking about how ‘spaces’ still existed to do work which was radical and rooted in the everyday problems experienced by communities. The seminar also shifted from the micro-politics of community engagement to the macro-politics of events shaping politics in the UK and beyond; Brexit, Trump, Scottish independence and the phenomenal (and inspiring) rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party were all discussed. One speaker said the ‘world was on fire’ whilst another argued - in a statement which really made me think - that we were living through the end of ‘neoliberal hegemony’.

In conclusion, seminars like these are really important because they create spaces for important discussions and debates about the state of current practice. Moreover, they are important because the spaces to engage in critical reflection and analysis are increasingly rare in a world where practice has been colonised by government imposed targets and rampant managerialism