

# Critical Engagement and Creative Approaches

## A Reflection

Community Learning is about relationships.  
It is about the way we relate to each other and our world.

In Alastair McIntosh's book "Soil and Soul" (2001, p33), he refers to a passage from the writings of the Apache philosopher, V.F. Cordova. She tells of an occasion when she watched her daughter and her 'Anglo' friend take their infant sons out for their first springtime.

"My daughter set her eight or nine month old son on to a barely greening lawn. She introduced him to the grass, encouraging him to touch it, even taste it. She pointed out the temperature, the breeze, the sky and the clouds. The other mother came differently prepared for her son's encounter with the world. She brought a blanket, which she spread out for her son. She brought toys as distraction and she did not join her son so much as hovered over him in a protective manner: not allowing him to grasp at the grass ('dirty'). My daughter introduced her son to the world he lived in; the other mother introduced her son to a potentially dangerous 'environment' ".

At its core, community learning adopts a positive, challenging relationship to those with whom it works. In our work we demonstrate our faith in human possibility; we encourage participation, risk taking and engagement; we speak of respect and creativity; we believe in co-operation and community. Our values base recognises the challenges that are faced daily by all of us in our relationship to the reality that is our family, our workplace, our neighbourhood, our society – our world.

For increasing numbers in Britain, this world presents as a negative experience. The UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 7 research (2007) provided a comprehensive assessment of the lives and well being of children and young people in 21 nations of the industrial world. It gathered together available data under six different headings or dimensions including material well-being; health and safety; peer and family relationships and young people's own subjective sense of well-being. The resultant table showed the United Kingdom at the bottom of the list of 21 nations.

In Richard Wilkinson's and Kate Pickett's seminal work, "The Spirit Level", the United Kingdom is shown to be one of the world's most unequal countries. They measure the level of social dysfunction across a range of areas including community life and social relations; mental health and drug use; teenage births; violence and educational performance. They conclude that 'inequality is, in an essential respect, the common denominator, and a highly damaging force'. (2009, p 193)

Faced with this unfolding reality there has been a growth in so-called 'diversionary' activity. In the Positive Futures Case Study Research "Knowing the Score" (Nov 2006), the Diversionary Approach was identified with, amongst others, the following characteristics, 'fixed outcomes as targets; belief in the intrinsic value of the activity itself; short or fixed term delivery; authoritarian discipline and mass participation as an indicator of success. Like the 'Anglo' friend's child in Cordova's story, the young participants were being diverted from a nasty world and impelled to do something the programme leaders thought was worthwhile. This approach is being taken forward by police, schools and social workers particularly targeting young people exhibiting challenging behaviour and funded by those anxious to seek specific answers to specific isolated problems. Interestingly the research also details the characteristics of a preferred Developmental Approach which would be more identifiable with community learning /youth work principles and practice.

At the present time, therefore, it might be reasonable to conclude that community learning is living in hostile territory. If it is promoting positive relationships and constructive, critical engagement, the dominant culture of the current environment seeks to adopt a more risk-averse, command and control, fear-inducing mind-set. Increasingly research and personal experiences seem to indicate this is having a depressing, negative, even soul-destroying impact on our population, as demonstrated by mental health statistics and incidences of alcohol abuse, obesity and violence.

Paradoxically, however, it is perhaps only when standing in hostile territory, that a more assertive, self-critical and bold response is most effective. For understandable, if not always laudable, reasons, community learning workers have often allowed their work priorities to be guided by funding streams targeted at what are perceived to be hot spots. Policies have been allowed to be developed in order to address specific issues often ignoring the wider context. Legislation has been enacted, which seeks to increase certainties and reduce risk, often with little sense of the impact on wider communities or practical consequences e.g. difficulties in recruiting volunteers. Management styles have grown, which have promoted mechanistic approaches and undermined innovation and responsiveness. The language of community learning has been cherry picked and many words have been captured and used as headlines, buzz words and slogans often obfuscating and sanitising a powerful intention or admirable goal.

At this juncture, a re-appraisal of some foundational matters should perhaps be undertaken.

The purpose of community learning needs to be restated.

Within the current 'happiness' and poverty/ inequality debates, there is a wealth of philosophical and theoretical material which could inform our understanding and practice particularly if it encourages a revisiting of the debates of Smith, Hume, Hutcheson and other Enlightenment thinkers not to mention the work of Geddes, Davie and MacMurray. It seems to me important that we lift our eyes

from immediate concerns and rush slowly and thoughtfully to the bigger, history-long deliberations over human nature and the role of the educator.

This would lead to an exploration of a second foundation stone of community learning. We need to be clearer about our relationship to those with whom we work. Just as human beings are beginning to appreciate that they are part of the totality that is nature and not an external dominating and determining force, so a parallel position exists for the community learning worker. As Allan Kaplan, the South African development worker puts it, "Development cannot be created or engineered. As a process, it exists independently of the development practitioner. All that we can do is facilitate processes which are already in motion... Development is not something which is brought. Being driven from within, it is not the prerogative of an outsider... Respect for the integrity of others' processes must be paramount... Real development work cannot be done to others on behalf of third parties... Development interventions have to flow out of the development processes of those seeking to develop". ('The Development of Capacity, 1999, Community Development Resource Association')

From this radical perspective, just as mankind is in nature, so the worker is in 'community' as part of the total process with the people. This adds a potency and depth to the oft stated 'Starting from where people are at' approach. The worker is embedded in the people's agenda, an agenda that is alive and lived and vital.

The community learning approach is nevertheless about developing capacity to enable engagement as active citizens. But is it realistic to expect the 'ordinary' citizen to take part and influence such matters as climate change, world financial systems and global poverty? In an article in "Scotland on Sunday" over a decade ago (S.O.S. – 26/01/1997) Sheila McLean, Professor of Law and Ethics in medicine at Glasgow University stated that 'In the past, there seems to have been an assumption that science was value-neutral... it was assumed that the people had no voice... We were disenfranchised by our lack of technical knowledge or skills, relegated to a back seat when the 'boffins' spoke. And, of course, we had no control over the questions which these immensely clever people asked. (But) no matter the topic, the one issue which is constantly emphasised is the need for public comment. Public involvement is one thing but to produce any results which are worthwhile, the debate should be informed. Education, therefore, is the crux of the matter. (But) public education must be conceived in a wider sense... The issues in which the public have a unique role to play are those which affect the moral tone of the community... The question of how a programme of public education can seriously be conducted still has to be resolved'.

McLean's view, therefore, is that no matter the technical and scientific complexity of a topic, there is a vital role for people to play in making moral and ethical comment on matters from euthanasia to surveillance cameras to nuclear energy. She concludes her article, however, by raising what she refers

to as 'the bigger question' which is how such a necessary programme of education can be brought into being.

McLean's support for wider and informed public involvement resonates with George Davie's view that the critical role of education can only properly be fulfilled through engagement with the wider community. In her book 'The Stranger Within' (2009), Jean Barr reminds her readers of, 'that strong adult education tradition which is committed to the collective creation of knowledge where community based and 'dialogically inclined' groups of activists and citizens work collaboratively to examine their experiences with a view to transforming society in democratic direction' (p16). Barr states that ' we need to explore how to achieve some kind of an 'educated public' (or publics) in the context of large scale economies, mass populations... and globalised, digitalised culture' (p174).

The challenges being suggested therefore are to revisit the purpose of community learning; to move our practice much more within communities and with people; to recognise the central role of citizens in building sustainable human democracies and guiding policy direction and with imagination, bring into being public spaces where a 'disputatious, discursive, reflective, theorizing way of life' (Barr, p21) becomes possible.

The creation of such a community learning framework would fundamentally challenge the role of the Local Authority and its alleged 'partnership' with the voluntary and community sectors. The position of the Local Authority has already shifted markedly over the past two decades and is now facing severe financial constraints which will place significant pressure on maintaining key statutory services and will threaten these services which are not identified as mandatory provision – such as youth work, adult education and community development.

The bold initiative would be to focus the resources of the Local Authority in order to authentically foster the growth of local authority in the organisations, groupings and neighbourhoods in its area. This would require developing a management approach that was less mechanistic and more systemic; a thinking style that was less reductionist and more holistic; and partnership practices that invited engagement and signalled a willingness to shift the nature and balance of power relations.

On such an initiative, the learning society that is potentially Scotland, could be built. There is growing evidence, alluded to above, of the necessity to engage with our citizens in a way which will help affirm the worth of human beings, create a more equal society and challenge the soul destroying, controlling and fragmenting culture that so dominates Britain at present.

The role of community learning is to engage with the people and facilitate the development of processes that will liberate. Ours is a content less, contentless model. It is a process-focussed approach designed to explore different perspectives. The aim is to assist people to improve the situation – not to find a

solution. There is no one solution, or answer. We are confronting what the systems experts call 'an adaptive problem' or 'a wicked problem' or 'a mess'. In the face of this "messy" predicament we need to focus on enabling critical engagement. That is engagement which is critical, in the sense of careful judgment or evaluation, as much as it is critical, in the sense of crucial to the growth of our democracy.

The boldness now demanded must also demonstrate creative practical approaches and many so-called green shoots are already evident.

Jean Barr cites Grant Kester's work with 'floating dialogues' on Lake Zurich; Cynthia Cockburn's research with women's peace groups in Belfast, Bosnia and Israel/Palestine; the work of the World Social Forum and the work of Sally McKinnon, an Australian activist educator.

More locally there are examples of people coming together for a range of reasons including the Fife Food Initiative; the growth of community social enterprises; the Manchester community allotment scheme; Tilda Swinton's film pilgrimage; the Transition Towns movement; the Big Lunch Initiative across Britain and the Big Tent event in Falkland.

The Serious Fun Conference will use the Worldcafe structure and various versions of Coffee House Conversations are being developed by the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (R.S.A.) and by others at conferences and in neighbourhoods.

These and many other creative approaches seek to encourage critical engagement and dialogue. In a real sense, the topic does not matter. Dog fouling can be as critical an issue at one time, in one place, as stem cell research might be at another location. Line dancing or conversational French; a game of football or an outdoor education expedition will often provide an opportunity for heated debates on issues, apparently unrelated to the original topic. Such is the nature of community learning. Such is the nature of an active, learning society.

But how might these individual events, structures and happenings transform society?

Amitai Etzioni, the American Philosopher, in a recent article in "Prospect" magazine (September 2009) places some faith in what he refers to as "Moral megalogues" – mass dialogues over what is right and wrong. He writes "megalogues involve millions of members of a society exchanging views with one another at work places, during family gatherings, in the media and at public events. They are often contentious and passionate and while they have no clear beginning or end, over time they lead to changes in culture and peoples behaviour... The megalogue about the relationship between consumerism and human flourishing is now flickering but has yet to become a leading topic."

Is human flourishing not what we are about? Is this not part of our agenda? What is the community learning contribution? If the outcomes of these megalogues and conversations were shared; if these groupings were networked; would this not add power to these democratic deliberations? What should our role be in such activity?

And finally, at this period of considerable upheaval, do we need to consider breaking from traditional funding, administrative and practice models in order to achieve our goal - our goal to help build the critical conscious learning society? In 1995, a group of us produced a booklet entitled 'Scotland as a Learning Society'. It offered the following definition of the Learning Society:

*'a society where citizens value, support and engage in learning as a matter of course, in all areas of activity' (SCEC 1995)*

Such a society is possible.

Fraser Patrick

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