Re-pollinate, recultivate, revitalise but don’t give up on social purpose

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Introduction

‘In the learning paradigm, it is not clear what happens to the agency of the educator; the choices that are made, the causes espoused and the sides taken’ (Martin, 2006a, pp.15). In this paper I wish to explore how the agency of practitioners engaged in adult community education is affected by the well documented target-driven, economistic landscape which has seen drastic budget cuts in provision. Nevertheless, I will seek to demonstrate how the struggle to provide social purpose adult education does continue, as practitioners find ways to respond to community needs, deliver negotiated curriculum contextualising people’s lived experiences. The evidence for this paper is situated in England but given the neo-liberal policies at a global level, I suggest that it should have resonance elsewhere.

A golden age?

Firstly I am conscious when attending events and conferences of an ageing adult education population, not always averse to harking back to a golden age of post-war social purpose and radical tradition of adult education. There is no doubt that there are a number of well documented examples of social purpose adult education (for example Lovett, (1975), Fordham et al., (1979)). Martin Yarnitt warns us however, of wallowing in ‘nostalgia for the radical era of post war adult education, that period of 15 years from the late 1960s to the early 1980s which was marked by some notable triumphs, but also some lost opportunities’ (Yarnitt, 1995, pp.69).

I came into adult education in the early 1980s, at a time when an oppositional stance to Thatcherite policies provided a unifying force and where the structures were sympathetic to politically charged adult education. However, even at a trades union unemployed centre where I was initially volunteering, then working, the most sought after adult education programmes were predominantly leisure-based. The activists involved in political/social education and projects were in a minority. This was also my experience when I co-ordinated a women’s project that aimed to give working class women an active voice in the city’s decision-making processes. Although the intention of the project was to bring about collective change, often individualised personal development was the negotiating starting point for women’s groups.

My experience, over the last three decades, relates closely with that of Rennie Johnston who states, ‘I am committed to the aims and aspirations of popular education and am involved in ongoing debates about the nature and direction of popular education and in attempting to theorise it, I am still sometimes frustrated by my limited ability to translate this into sustained and meaningful practice on the ground’ (Johnston, 2005, pp.64). I may have few examples of being central to popular struggles, but I have been able to use agency to negotiate and work in egalitarian ways with community groups which foregrounded community knowledge and were located in the philosophies of Friere and Illich.
Does John Field have a point, then, when he states that ‘most authors in the radical tradition tended to argue largely on ethical or political grounds rather than from an empirical base’ (Field, 2007, pp.161)? Allman and Wallis uphold the need for realism in a discourse of radical adult education which can sometimes, they feel, leave practitioners undermined, disheartened and demoralised, ‘far too frequently, radical educators have disappointed themselves and invited the ridicule of others because we have lacked, or at least not stressed, a degree of realism. We should never have assumed, or permitted others to assume, a direct or automatic, sequential relation between radical education and macro level social change’ (Allman and Wallis, 1995, pp.19).

Moreover, according to Yarnitt, adult education has only ever reached a small minority of people and ‘as for the radicals in adult education, despite an ambitious project – education to combat oppression and to awaken resistance – in practice we seemed somehow content to focus most entirely on a tiny minority of the population’. The lack of a post war mass movement, nothing that equates to the ‘rise of the shop stewards movement and the National Council of Labour Colleges’, meant that ‘without a unifying pressure, radical adult education remained on the whole, a series of disconnected field of activity’. Yarnitt concedes that ‘if we can attempt a balance sheet of the era, it is clear that it renewed the radicalism of thought and action which has always informed the liveliest adult education. And even though the political tide has ebbed, for the time being, the writing and practice of the 70s has left an imprint which cannot be ignored, even by its detractors’ (Yarnitt, 1995, pp.73).

The learning age?

Griff Foley neatly binds the past to the present:

This then is where we are with a radical adult education and learning. We have the traditions which are a resource and inspiration; radical adult education as pedagogy, provision and social movement (Thomas, 1982; Evans, 1987; Lovett, 1988; Newman, 1994; 1999). Then we have the situation we are in now. A globalised capitalism invading more and more areas of human life, including learning and education. Adult education provision increasingly commodified and dispersed. The work of adult educators more individualised and pressured. The very notion of ‘adult education’ disappearing (Foley, 2001, pp.84).

This is a critical moment in the continuance of funded adult education in England. Not only do we, like many other countries, have an instrumental focus on employability and basic skills, but a Labour government has put the mechanisms in place for two-tier provision. The poor can access basic skills, narrowly defined workforce skills and a modicum of personal development, whilst those that can pay have access to traditional evening class fayre –this provision varies greatly in different local authority areas. According to the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), ‘55,000 adult learners have been lost to publicly funded safeguarded adult learning in the last year. This now means that in just three years there has been a fall of 184,600 adult learners in programmes for personal fulfilment, civic participation and community development. This fall is on top of the 1.4 million adult learning places which have been lost from all publicly-funded adult learning over the last two years’ (Tuckett, 2008). Loss of provision naturally means loss of jobs and expertise.

These policy constraints on adult learning provision are well known but the situation is exacerbated by an increasing emphasis on health and safety measures and quality
assurance. A key aspect of working in community-settings is to address physical and attitudinal barriers to participation. Policies safeguarding children have affected childcare provision and the ability to work informally with adults with young children. Procedures designed to protect staff such as lone working directives, risk assessments outlining hazards for any eventuality, have the affect of making staff risk-averse, as institutions transfer greater responsibility for health and safety onto individuals. This can act as a deterrent for working where there are perceived security risks, often in areas of greatest social need. As society becomes more litigious and the fear of 'risk' increases, these preventative measures could encroach further on the agency of individuals, communities and their civil liberties. It is interesting to reflect that whilst government at a macro level increases risks to its population by its foreign policy interventions and inaction on environmental issues, it acts to control risk at a micro level.

So this is the context in which I wish to discuss adult educator agency! However Coare rightly says that, ‘Adult Educators have grown used to working creatively in the spaces of government policy: invited spaces thus become creative spaces’ (Coare, 2003, pp.51). My current work with the Communities and Partnerships team at the University of Leeds uses funding with utilitarian aims creatively to ensure that social purpose work in communities is sustained. This objective, we argue, supports the University’s widening participation and civic engagement agendas. Social purpose is also central to our interdisciplinary community-negotiated Islamic Studies programme (see Fraser and Coles, 2003). Established 12 years ago, this programme brings multi-ethnic communities together to engage in critical debate around Islamic religion, history, culture and contemporary thought. Delivered in working class areas, issues arising from the ‘risk society’ e.g. war on terror, fundamentalism, freedom of speech makes for very complex, muddled praxis.

Further evidence of current practitioner agency is also sourced from research undertaken with the Progression and Engagement between Communities and Higher Education (PECHE) Network, a regional initiative developed in 2006. This Network has spawned, with widening participation funding, a number of very small-scale projects, entitled the Reconnect projects. As the name suggests these projects are funded to link up policies that aim to work with communities e.g. neighbourhood renewal, community cohesion, child poverty, adult learning and widening participation to higher education. In recent times, ‘partnership has become central to the UK Labour government’s approach to tackling complex policy issues’ (Boydell et al., 2008, pp.210), however these are bounded by their own targets, ethos and timescales, there has been little space for bottom-up cross-policy collaborations.

Adult education/learning is a very demoralised sector, Jane Thomson remarked on the ‘widespread demoralisation’ at conferences in the early 1990s, ‘People felt silenced, some were scared most believed there was nothing else that could be done except to go along with the new order and live in the cracks’(Thompson, 1995, pp.52). Apart from a brief respite in 1997, the situation has deteriorated, ‘ New Labour took office with such a generous and inclusive vision of lifelong learning, which makes the subsequent return to a narrow utilitarian focus on learning for work all the more dispiriting’ (Tuckett, 2007, pp.5).

It has therefore been really surprising and encouraging to find the interest and enthusiasm engendered in the delivery of these projects. Having been given the flexibility and space to be creative, staff have shown a willingness to share different practices, ideas and new ways of working. Outcomes have included a range of interagency staff development activity and events; the development of critical thinking mechanisms in community-based curriculum which is constrained by competency-based assessment; community research
projects, jointly facilitated by the voluntary sector and HE; active citizenship curriculum delivered in communities; HE collaboration with minority ethnic organisations and the establishment of a wiki to open new channels of dialogue between sectors engaged in adult education. So far over 300 practitioners and students have been involved with these projects.

The clear message that emanates from staff ‘on the ground’ is their wish to broaden provision. When asked about the main purpose of adult education, the overwhelming response was related to personal and community development. A senior adult education officer voiced concern about how the misappropriation of the term ‘skills’ by government has given the concept such negative connotations. Practitioners are feeling impeded in their ability to reach out to communities, making comments such as ‘we need greater understanding of the importance of community provision and our need to be at the heart of the community’, ‘we need a better understanding of community learners’ needs’. They also felt that the lack of grass-routes partnerships spanning across sectors was failing communities. McGivney (2000, pp.56) states that inter-agency partnerships ‘are a crucial plank of any outreach work and are vital to its effectiveness’.

When interviewed about their work in general, it is clear that agency is brought to bear in adapting and modifying provision such as basic skills and English language to include broader curriculum. The search for the means to sustain significant work with communities is ongoing; examples include political education, creative projects with refugees, asylum seekers, homeless, curriculum on globalisation and collaborating on community publications. These initiatives are often delivered over and above the target-driven work that funds adult learning. The dedication that adult educators bring, and very often the personal identification underpinning that commitment is analogous to the situation of welfare workers, ‘despite the stresses, frustrations and (compared with the private sector) the poor pay that welfare professionals have to put up with, what is striking is the depth of their commitment to the work’ (Hoggett et al., 2006, pp.689).

I would argue that within current policy constraints, agency is taking place, there are choices to be made, whether to adhere to policy dictat or to contrive ways of delivering broader goals whilst meeting prescribed outcomes. Those practitioners who were involved in adult education when there was greater freedom are more likely to find the spaces for social purpose. However, my research suggests that there is no difference in commitment between age groups. (I would contend that only a limited cohort of adult education staff were ever engaged in more radical agendas).

A new age?

Those of us committed to critical and emancipatory adult learning and education can respond to these changes [commodification of adult education] in three ways. We can capitulate and become more efficient managers of learning for capitalism. We can nostalgically and ineffectually bemoan the decline and death of earlier traditions. Or we can fight on the new terrain. The third alternative is the only viable one for radical educators. And it requires a different understanding of what adult learning and education are, who adult educators are and what their work involves (Foley, 2001, pp.84).

Active dialogue or ‘the seal of transformed relations’ (Freire, cited in Allman and Wallis, 1995, pp.25) between different age groups and sectors could revitalise and help retain the social purpose vision otherwise this tradition could become fossilised. More imaginative spaces are required to engage with and listen to new generations of workers.
Those who were in the field when there was far greater scope for agency, have a role in working with more recent recruits to develop what Johnston saw as ‘his task as bridging the gap between ‘radical rhetoric’ and ‘conservative practice’ (Armstrong and Miller, 2006, pp.302). Collective praxis can help alleviate Martin’s concerns about ‘the processes of respectable-isation, demoralis-ation and responsible-isation’ (Martin, 2006b, pp.288).

This brings me to the role of the research community. Does an oppositional stance to instrumental policies necessarily enhance the cause of social purpose or, as Johnston points out in relation to popular education, is there a need to bridge ‘rhetoric and reality’ (Johnston, 2005, pp.72)? According to Barbara Merrill, ‘research in the academy remains largely distant and removed from the subjects of research’ (Merrill, 2005, pp.142), which, in my view includes the practitioners in the field.

Field (2007, pp.168), in his discussion on the correlation between social capital and learning states that evidence confirms ‘the significance of outreach, partnership and relationship building as basic element in any strategy for community-based learning. These lessons are already well known to practitioners, but policymakers sometimes benefit from the presence of new evidence to confirm what is already known’. Genuine outreach and community development activity have very nearly disappeared in England. We urgently need some current research which highlights the impact of outreach on participation in non formal and formal learning. Likewise for community adult education, where the principles as outlined by Johnson (2003, pp.16) remain fundamental for increasing participation in learning, in active citizenship, in the development of communities and in addressing the democratic deficit.

Even within Research Assessment Exercise constraints, surely research activity and methodology can engage communities in more equitable ways rather than just utilising them as a resource. Communities which are perceived to be deficient in some way are a rich vein for research. As Merrill states, ‘emancipatory and transformative research is not new’ (Merrill, 2005, pp.142), (e.g. Budd Hall, 1978). Perhaps, however we need to look at other disciplines for more contemporary discourses on radical models of research. For example activist geographers have articulated their desire to move knowledge production away from the academy (see Chatterton, 2006; Fuller and Kitchen, 2004).

Without a doubt, this is a hostile environment for social purpose adult education. However I am continually surprised at the numbers of community-based initiatives that are taking place against considerable odds. These practitioners may not have ideological praxis but by their actions demonstrate a commitment to overcome the structural barriers of class, race and gender. Discourses may change and adapt to reflect a late modern complex society, but many of the issues concerning working class communities remain constant and the commodification of adult education does little to address these. There needs to be greater alignment between the needs of the practice and research communities who will have little to research, theorise or polemicise about if there is no body of practice.

Ian Martin asks ‘Where have all the flowers gone?’ (Martin, 2006a, pp.15); my response is that hardy perennials are managing to survive in hazardous conditions, but new and different strains need sustenance and nurturing until fairer conditions arrive.

References


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