Community education and lifelong learning

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Introduction
People can learn in many different ways and contexts and if the society in which they live regards learning as a normal activity for people of all ages then everyone, rather than a limited group, is likely to be effectively engaged in some form of education of their choice. Currently, however, participation in post school education and training in the UK (and across Europe, see Holford et al, 2008) is a highly classed activity with those from social classes IV and V unlikely to continue their education and those from social classes I and II over-represented, particularly in Higher Education (see Aldridge and Tuckett, 2008). Moreover, participation is gendered because men receive a much greater share of employer-funded education and training (ibid).

What do policies suggest that the purpose of a learning society should be? Ranson (1998) has identified three main models: learning for work, learning for citizenship and learning for democracy.

A view of the learning society that prioritises learning for work sees its main task as enabling employees to become more adaptable to a greater variety of occupational tasks. For example, in 2000 the European Union set itself a new strategic goal ‘to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (Lisbon European Council, 2000 paragraph 5).

The ‘learning for citizenship’ approach broadens the narrow conception of the learning society that concentrates only on skills for work. It offers a more enriched conception of work and wealth creation that includes the quality of people’s social, cultural and political life as well as the development of their vocational skills where people come together to engage in a shared endeavour. Moreover, ‘rethinking the nature of work cannot be separated from the social and cultural relations (between the sexes, races and generations) that define who works and thus the social conditions of economic growth’ (Ranson, 1998: 27).

The ‘learning for democracy’ approach starts from a concern to make sense of the economic, social and political transformations that have occurred and to create a learning society that would be at the centre of change. Such change requires a renewed commitment to learning that leads to a revitalised sense of democratic and social purpose. From this perspective a learning society would be: ‘open to new ideas …and co-operate in the practice of change and critically reviewing it’ (Ranson, 1998: 28).

These differing perspectives have major implications for community educators. Community education can offer an integrated structure for the promotion of lifelong
learning that takes positive action to enable excluded people and communities to participate in education and training and promotes a learning society that is for everyone. However, the learning society can be conceptualised in ways that waste the creativity and knowledge of many of its citizens by presenting a narrow view of the purpose of learning. The next section therefore explores lifelong learning policies.

Lifelong learning policies
Policies about lifelong learning were first developed in Europe and the UK in the early 1990s. Although there had been a number of policy documents produced by the OECD and UNESCO in the 1970s (e.g. Fauré, 1972) the idea of lifelong learning only entered the mainstream political vocabulary when the concept was adopted by the European Union (EU) as a key priority in 1995 in the Paper, ‘Teaching and Learning towards the Learning Society’ (CEC, 1995). What is seen as legitimate in terms of policy and practice privileges certain visions and interests which embody claims to speak with authority in ways that shut out alternatives. So if the problem facing governments is conceptualised as being about employment and training then solutions that prioritise the development of vocational skills follow. The EU saw their main task as responding to:

‘factors of upheaval’ (ibid) in an economic and employment climate where mobility and short-term contracts had become the norm and so they prioritised learning for work. This led to a debate that emphasised the economic importance of knowledge and this was picked up by the UK. Here it was suggested that the ‘information and knowledge based revolution of the twenty-first century [will be based] on investment in the intellect and creativity of people’ (DfEE, 1998: 9).

However, although the conception of lifelong learning and the learning society may be limited to learning for work, the potential exists to interpret the policies more radically. One particular issue has been the prevailing orthodoxy that privileges the view that education must be modernised and become more response to the needs of employers. From this perspective education becomes the mere instrument of the economy. Such a view of society denigrates the values of caring and mutual support and values the economic over the social. It also excludes those people who are not part of the ‘normal’ labour market such as those who are caring for young children or those with disabilities that prevent them from working.

If the assumptions contained in these policies are to be challenged then it is important to create a framework for critically analysing their contradictions so that opportunities for more radical action can be identified. Policies about lifelong learning draw on a number of inter-related fallacies that cumulatively give the impression of a commitment to lifelong learning only in relation to its economic value. However, if these fallacies are separated out and examined it becomes easier to see how those that are committed to a more radical view might challenge them. In order to do this the next section explores each in turn.

Fallacy: Education and training are commodities in the market
Many EU and UK policies put education and training within the market place and regard it as a commodity that can be bought and sold like any other good (e.g. CEC, 2000, 2004; DfES, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2003). From this perspective failures in
education are assumed to be because the ‘producers’ of education and training have taken over and pursue their own purposes at the expense of the needs of the ‘consumers’ of the service. Marketisation and the commodification of public services are thus portrayed as mechanisms that, through the promotion of competition, lead to greater efficiency and increased consumer control. The overt claim is that such policies will bring about an improvement in the quality of educational provision whilst the covert aim is to undermine the power of those professionals who appear to stand in the way of competition.

There is little empirical evidence, however, to suggest that removal of the power of professionals and the placing of education and training within a market context does improve efficiency or user control. Rather than empowering consumers a market driven system perpetuates inequalities because:

‘the market elides, but reproduces, the inequalities that consumers bring to the market place. Under the guise of neutrality, the institution of the market actively confirms and reinforces the pre-existing social class order of wealth and privilege’ (Ranson, 1998: 95–96).

In a class, gender and ‘race’-divided society this process of ‘marketisation’ means that ‘cultures which give primacy to the values of community and locality’ lose out in the ‘scramble for educational opportunity based on individual opportunity and choice’ (Bowe et al, 1993: 14). This is because they do not have the financial and cultural capital to be ‘active and strategic’ choosers. For those marginalised by poverty or geography, their choice will be limited by the lack of accessible provision; for those marginalised by cultural difference, excluded from current systems, it will be their lack of knowledge and understanding of the system itself that disadvantages them. There seems little likelihood that the market will do anything to improve people’s dispositional barriers to learning.

Similarly, this argument suggests that within the market context, education and training are activities that will enhance the individual’s ability to engage only in economic life and through this contribute to ‘national culture and quality of life’ (DfEE, 1995: 3). Once the citizen is constructed primarily as a consumer a very limiting notion of lifelong learning follows. At the centre of the marketisation model is the idea of self-interested individuals as people with rights to control both their own selves and their own property free from coercion and restraint. An intrinsically selfish motivation and competition are assumed because people are not seen as contributors to the democratic society that includes freedom to constrain individual action for the greater good of the whole community. Moreover, as Biesta (2006: 177) points out, by making lifelong learning a private good that is only valuable in relation to its economic function it becomes increasingly difficult to claim collective resources, particularly resources for supporting lifelong learning’s personal and democratic dimensions.

**Fallacy: Economic success equals eradication of deprivation and exclusion**

Inadequate skill levels within the unemployed population are seen as the causes of poverty in many policies (e.g. CEC, 2004; Scottish Government, 2007) and learning is identified as a way out. It is argued in these policy documents that education and training should become more responsive to the needs of employers since otherwise the needs of the economy will not be met. However, the link between education and training and economic development is complex and there is little evidence that
participating in learning will necessarily lead to greater prosperity. For example, Levin and Kelley (1997: 241), in their review of research in the USA, found that ‘test scores have never shown a strong connection with either earnings or productivity’. Rather, they found that if education was to be effective for economic development it was crucially dependent on complementary inputs from business and government. These inputs included new investment, new methods of production and of organising work, new technologies, industrial relations based on trust, sufficient customers able to buy high quality services and new managerial approaches.

These arguments that equate participation in learning with economic success also ignore the sharpening polarisation in income and wealth that can lead to a fundamental split in societies. Whilst paid work is seen as the best way of averting poverty, if people are to be treated in relation to their potential contribution to the market economy, then a value is attached to each individual according to that contribution. ‘So people with learning difficulties may come to be seen as a poor investment, more expensive to train, less flexible and less employable’ (Coffield, 1999: 485). In these ways social exclusion is intensified rather than reduced.

A final issue is the impact of globalisation where it is assumed that the nation-state has diminishing powers and so there is little opportunity to intervene except through promoting education and training as a source of sustainable competition. As Coffield (1999: 480) argues, this leads to the assumption that the ‘new economic forces unleashed by globalisation and technology are as uncontrollable as natural disasters and so governments have no choice but to introduce policies to ‘up skill’ their workforce’. Such a view forgets that skills are not neutral but are socially constructed by, for example, trade unions negotiating higher pay for those jobs that are held predominantly by male members or employers offering good quality education and training only to their permanent, highly paid employees.

**Fallacy: Failure is the fault of the individual**
This fallacy is intimately related to the preceding two. Given that the market is perceived as fair and equal, then failure to succeed in a market structure is regarded as rooted in the failings of the individual to engage appropriately. For example, the EU suggested that the individual who failed to engage in education was the source of difficulties: ‘those who have not been able to acquire... the relevant basic skills threshold must be offered continuing opportunities to do so, however often they may have failed to take up what has been offered’ (CEC, 2000: 11). Within the policy frameworks offered for lifelong learning issues such as non-participation, educational under-achievement, lack of knowledge of the range of education and training opportunities, are not perceived as structural failures but rather issues of individual attitude or ability. However, many adults do not participate, not because of low motivation but because of powerful constraints that arise from cultural and social class divisions. School creates (or reinforces) sharp divisions in society, by conditioning children to accept different expectations and status patterns according to their academic ‘success’ or ‘failure’. Through the use of imposed standards and selection, the education system traditionally rejects large numbers of the population, many of whom subsequently consider themselves as educational failures. It is hardly surprising that people do not want to engage in a process that is portrayed as ‘learn or else’ rather than a contribution to human flourishing.
In many ways lifelong learning is regarded as a ‘moral obligation and social constraint’ (Coffield, 1999: 488) by the state and employers and legitimates the shifting of the burden of responsibility for education, training and employment on to the individual. In so doing it implicitly denies any notion of objective structural problems such as lack of jobs, and the increasing proportion of poorly paid, untrained, routine and insecure jobs. At the same time the term ‘employability’ also hides the tensions between training workers to meet the short-term needs of employers and the preparation for frequent changes of job for which high-level general education may be more useful.

If, therefore, it is the structure of society that creates inequalities, and education and training are part of that structure, then why should individuals participate in a system in which they know they start at a disadvantage? It is insufficient simply to recognise inequality and strive for greater inclusion; rather we need to look beyond that to the causes of that inequality. Moreover, if we regard education as being about responding to individual need then no attention is paid to the ways in which these ‘needs’ are politically constructed and understood. By individualising the characteristics, such as a lack of basic skills, that justify employers and others treating people differently, the trend towards lifelong learning also helps fragment the excluded and encourages a search for individual solutions. This pattern then gets reproduced through other areas of public life, such as when the welfare state switches its focus from passive support to actively inserting people back into society, the most significant strategy being through training (see Field, 2000: 111). Individuals are then assumed to be able to acquire the skills and knowledge required for them to take active responsibility for their own wellbeing. The fallacy that individual failings lie at the heart of either educational failure or economic success creates a convenient scapegoat for structural inequality justified through the workings of the market.

Fallacy: access to education is fair
Jackie Brine (2006) has pointed out that the discourse of the EU is premised on a two-track approach to the knowledge rich and the knowledge poor where the former are entitled to investment whereas the latter have their learning needs identified by others. She further suggests that this leads to an ‘individualised and pathologised learner that is simultaneously constructed as “at risk” and “the risk”’ (Brine, 2006: 656). This discourse also pervades policy documents from the UK and suggests that the state’s role is to facilitate the active citizen who should be engaged in securing their own welfare through promoting a ‘flexible and adaptable workforce’ (Scottish Executive, 2003: 1). These policies in turn also suggest that access to education is fair because it is the individual that has failed to engage in it. However, the education and training that is available to the most disadvantaged is the least well funded and accessible. For example, only 24.72% of those accepted to university in the UK were from the lowest social classes (Reay et al, 2010) but this is the sector with the highest investment per student. Conversely, adult literacies education where social classes 4 and 5 are predominantly clustered, lies at the other end of the investment structure and this provision is also highly vulnerable to cuts. Another way in which access to education is unfair is because those who make decisions about the opportunities that are available are drawn from a narrow group. One effect of this class, gender and ‘race’ imbalance is that facilities, such as family-friendly services or opportunities that are geographically and culturally accessible
that could increase participation and study opportunities for everyone are seldom prioritised. Prioritising vocational and work-based education and training has tended to benefit men more than women partly because of women’s predominance in part-time work where the majority are responsible for paying their own fees for learning (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2008).

In addition, the EU put a particular emphasis on the use of new technology to deliver learning. For example it was suggested that ‘in a high-technology knowledge society...learners must become proactive and more autonomous, prepared to renew their knowledge continuously and to respond constructively to changing constellations of problems and contexts (CEC, 1998: 9). They have not shown, however, how the classed and gendered differences in access to, and familiarity with, these technologies are to be overcome. The classed, gendered and ‘raced’ nature of participation in education and training is often ignored and instead ‘equal opportunities’ policies based on a meritocratic model are implemented. This model ignores the process whereby opportunities are defined, interpreted and applied by those already in positions of power, which means that lifelong learning becomes one more way of reinforcing the status quo.

Conclusion
This paper has suggested that lifelong learning policies present a powerful policy steer about what should be prioritised precisely because they are so all encompassing. However, by deconstructing these policies it is possible to identify a number of paradoxes that throw up contradictions that in turn create spaces for challenge and alternative action. The possibility of adults constructing their own knowledge and contesting their exclusion is not a priority for these policies but is a clear possibility for community educators wishing to engage in dialogues with excluded communities. Knowledge, skills, understanding, curiosity and wisdom cannot be kept in separate boxes, depending simply on who is paying for or providing them. This means that, although much of the funding that is tied to lifelong learning policy implementation is linked to programmes that focus on increasing people’s employability, there are still spaces for action. Rather than a narrow conception of learning for the world of work the priority would be learning for citizenship leading to a revitalised sense of democratic and social purpose. What is necessary is a ‘problematising’ approach (see Freire, 1972) that enables oppressed groups to reflect critically on their reality in a way that enables them to alter their social relations. Education is not neutral and if it is seen as an individual and social force for emancipation it becomes a way of ‘tackling the urgent problems and real concerns of people living in the kind of difficult circumstances that would defeat the most courageous of us’ (Thompson, 2001: 11).

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