Learning, well-being and a democratic imperative: connecting intimate and cultural worlds

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Introduction

In this paper, I address two main issues: the importance of conceiving human flourishing as requiring socio-cultural as well as more individual and intimate levels of analysis. Second, to interrogate the contribution auto/biographical narrative enquiry can make to illuminating interconnections between individual and collective well-being when communities decline and decay. The backcloth is growing concern about the health of western democracies and increased alienation and cynicism among many people towards conventional politics, which can be especially strong in marginalised communities. People may turn to fundamentalist solutions in such places. Alongside this, and perhaps connected, are worrying levels of mental illness, in increasingly unequal societies (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). The basic argument of the paper is of a need to connect apparently disparate elements: it is insufficient, for instance, to offer psychological services, alone, in response to mental illness in distressed communities, as with the Layard Report (LSE, 2006), or to imagine that providing adult education, per se, is a solution, even if financially possible. I suggest more holistic understanding of how a range of factors interconnect in distressed communities is required, guiding policy and provision.

Communities like Stoke on Trent, in the English Midlands, for example, are suffering in many diverse ways, economically, socially and politically; as are parts of East London; or the Isle of Sheppey and coastal towns like Margate, in Kent. I could add many others, but these are places I know well, because of my own biography or auto/biographically, through in-depth research. Stoke, for instance, is where I was born, and is a classically ‘post-industrial’, ‘distressed city’ (Bailey, 2011). There has been a sharp decline and or collapse of industries like pottery, iron and steel, mining and the lifeworlds these sustained. There is large scale, intergenerational unemployment as well as poverty and poor health. Interestingly, there has also been an endemic crisis of civic governance and representative politics (Barkham, 2008). Stoke was once home to a vibrant, and perhaps interconnected, adult education and
civic tradition, which seems to have dissipated (Barkham, 2008; White, 2011; Goldman, 1995). Like parts of East London, it is also home to new fundamentalist politics, among elements of the white working class and in specific Muslim communities. The paper, in such contexts, combines an historical perspective - on the role of adult education in struggles for collective well-being - with a contemporary focus on the narratives of diverse people living in such communities. There is a basic question at the heart of this: how is well-being best understood and what might be some of the personal, educational, community and societal preconditions for its wider expression? And, more specifically, what is or ought to be the role and nature of adult learning in any process of re-generation?

**Fundamentalism and learning**

To repeat, the questions are fuelled by deep concern at the rise of fundamentalism. Anthony Giddens (1999) argues that this can be considered as a psychosocial defence, forged by fear of the other, in multi-cultural contexts, energised by feelings of hopelessness and anxiety. A struggle is taking place, he suggests, between fundamentalism and a learned cosmopolitanism, in which spaces exist or can be created for new forms of dialogue across difference; in short, for what Biesta (2011) calls enacting ‘the experiment of democracy’. However the relative absence of experiment and the decline of particular kinds of public space, in a more fragmented, individualised social order, may matter greatly in any consideration of well-being. Public space can be defined as separate from the market, from buying and selling, where strangers encounter each other as equal partners in the life of a society (Marquand, 2004).

Fundamentalism is, of course, nothing new: an earlier British adult education tradition, under the influence of figures like Tawney and Lindsay, was perpetually exercised by the fragility of democratic experiment and aware of the seductive power of fundamentalism. Historically, for all its imperfections, the old WEA/University alliance, for instance, created space for some experiment in learning democracy, as an antidote to the pathologies of fascism, totalitarianism and war. Concern over the health of democracy, however defined, is highly topical (‘democracy’ can be equated with the status quo of parliamentary democracy, or a wider experiment, to quote Bauman, never complete, to translate private problems
into an inclusive process of public debate and action (Biesta, 2011)). Questions about education’s role in addressing political disenchantment have also grown (Biesta, 2011). The fact of a more diverse society has created a related uncertainty about traditional mono-cultural notions of identity and citizenship, and questions of how diverse people with diverse traditions might live together. There is rising anxiety over the lack of engagement across difference and at the danger of segregated communities, where dialogue breaks down or is impossible (McGhee 2005). Disconnection can, as noted, provide fertile ground for fundamentalism.

One specific educational response to disenchantment with representative democracy is the development of citizenship education in schools (Arthur et al 2008). Here the problem can be seen to be one of inadequate socialisation and even moral fecklessness; however, deficit models of people and learning may stalk such responses: younger people, or for that matter adults, lack proper knowledge and skills, for instance, as well as moral fibre. Problems of citizenship become rooted in individual ignorance and or moral deficit rather than in the absence of space for democratic experience, across lives.

**Historical perspectives: the decline of popular education**

Historically, adult education, involving particular universities and the WEA, created space for some working class people to learn democracy. Such contributions have markedly declined at the same time as representative politics barely function in some communities (although no simplistic causal relationship is implied). Some researchers suggest that newer forms of adult learning for social and civic engagement are emerging, but evidence for this is limited (Field 2005). Certain researchers also assert that various types of engagement and social participation have declined more widely among the working class. Li, Savage and Pickles (2003) illuminate a marked reduction of participation in the classical institutions of the working class, such as working men’s clubs and trades unions. Clearly, recent social and economic changes have altered the contexts in which adult learning functions, including the decline of traditional sources of working class employment, trade union activity and association (Field, 2005). In Coventry, for instance, the post-war economic boom, based largely on the car industry, started to decline in the 1970s. Coventry has a long-standing multicultural population and recent migration.
Historically there was a commitment to community development and community education. Recent research (Beider, 2011) chronicles how local white working class people may feel themselves to be treated unfairly, and lacking ‘voice’. Racialised opinions can be seen in the context of people suffering the effects of neighbourhood loss, political disconnection and competition for scarce resources. Many local white working class people, in specific estates, feel that cultural identity, as embodied in social clubs, public housing and pubs, has largely disappeared, with little involvement by other ethnic groups. Some felt that no-one was advocating on their behalf (Beider, 2011).

**Auto/biographical narrative enquiry and the concept of recognition**

I have used in-depth, auto/biographical narrative research in various ‘distressed’ communities to explore people’s experiences of learning, living and well-being (Merrill and West, 2009). The approach is shaped by feminism and psychoanalysis, (more recently critical theory), in working with people over time, reflexively, to make sense of narrative material and to locate it in micro, mezzo and macro levels of analysis (Merrill and West, 2009). Such studies have illuminated, for instance, how new forms of community activism and democratic engagement can be nurtured, in apparently unpropitious circumstances, and how this might contribute to democratic as well as individual health (West, 2009; SECC, 2011).

Understanding the significance of particular developments, I suggest, requires new ‘psychosocial’ perspectives: focusing on the interplay of inner and outer worlds, including the role of narrative and relationships. Use has been made of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s idea of transitional space, and how people can experiment with selves and stories in ‘good enough’ space, characterised by a mix of empathic human care and challenge (Winnicott, 1971). To this can be added the concept of recognition, developed in the work of critical theorist Axel Honneth (Honneth, 2007). This is conceived as a building block of human well-being. Recognition is partly grounded in the intimate, interpersonal sphere, in building self-confidence in loving relationships; but also in the qualities of space and relationship in wider communities and society, and the extent to which people feel part of a community of rights, conferring self-respect (Honneth, 2007). This is not just about having a good opinion of self but of possessing a shared dignity of persons as
morally responsible agents, capable of participating in public deliberations. Experience of being honoured in communities for the contribution made leads to a third form of self-relation which Honneth calls self-esteem. People with high self-esteem will mutually acknowledge other’s roles. From this come loyalty, solidarity and, as both means and end, dialogue and learning across difference. This perspective straddles conventional psychological and sociological delineations; and challenges a tendency, in some adult education thinking, to conceive well-being as dependent on structural change alone, to the neglect of more intimate experience; or to be a matter of psychology without reference to the social order (Hunt and West, 2006).

Researching on the edge

I briefly illustrate some of these processes at work. First, I used in-depth narrative research into family learning and specific Sure Start programmes (West, 2009). Space was created to support distressed families but also for new, if fragile experiments in popular, democratic education. The research sought to chronicle, illuminate and theorise the impact and meaning of a number of programmes, and struggles for agency, through parents’ eyes; rather than, as more often is the case, from the perspectives of policy makers. The programmes sought, at least in their rhetoric, to provide sustained support and a range of new learning opportunities for vulnerable families. The research generated rich, complex insights into the significance and meaning of particular interventions. Certain programmes, despite conflicting agendas, provided sustaining but also empowering space for a range of hard-pressed parents, especially mothers: this included psychological support on difficult issues; and specific, innovative adult education courses, like women’s groups, where disturbance could be talked about in a safe enough environment; finally new public space was created, through management groups, where strangers could meet on equal terms and parents could talk back to power. The narratives of particular young women like Gina, in a community arts programme, or Heidi in Sure Start, chronicled in great depth in my writing, illuminate the interplay of good enough, reparative ‘parental’ relationships with project workers, in damaged and disturbed lives, and in building self-confidence. But also of self-respect nurtured in adult education groups and self-esteem forged in political engagement, including
advocacy work, on behalf of the community (West, 2009; Bainbridge and West, 2012).

Second, I refer to recent narrative based research/development on Sheppey. The Island has suffered from economic decline, persistent unemployment and high levels of mental illness, alongside strong feelings of hopelessness and neglect. A group of academics, myself included, collaborated with some local people to explore themes of health, well-being and resilience, using narrative interviews, life writing, stories, poems and photographs. Intensive workshops were organised and local people themselves empowered to extend the research study to wider populations. The group of local writers and academics sought to build wider understanding of the potential of narrative interviews and storytelling to chronicle experiences and to translate the material into a language of public debate and policy making.

Intensive workshops were provided on biographical narrative interviewing. Members of the group practised interviews, and being interviewed, and reflected on the experience. They noted the importance of listening, of giving space and time to the other, and of being respectful as to what their interviewee might be trying to say. Much discussion ensued about being non-judgemental, and how difficult this could be when listening to others and their stories. Awareness grew about the extent to which our own preconceptions and prejudices, sometimes at unconscious levels, can shape an encounter, and frame responses. We may have struggles of our own over similar matters and these might heighten difficulties in paying proper attention to others, when dealing with change, family troubles, unemployment, and losses of various kinds. Finally, the group engaged in transcribing interviews and their analysis (Merrill and West, 2009).

The group worked with a wider group (30-40 people) on collecting stories for inclusion in an anthology. The writers met with, interviewed and recorded their conversations with many more members of the community than was originally intended. The process produced complex, challenging and often unexpected responses. In thinking about the whole project, profound questions were asked by this community of researchers: what shapes and informs us? Why do we struggle with poor self-confidence and low self-respect? What preconceptions/prejudices do we bring to bear as we construct the ‘other’? Are we mindful of our tendency towards ‘splitting’, e.g. the idealisation of some on the Island compared to others? There was a strong social narrative, but this contrasted with a sense of isolation,
symbolised in the lack of signage (on roads and roundabouts), which was seen as symbolic of a broken/dislocated infrastructure and failed promises. There were strong senses of belonging, and place, but this was accompanied by a deep anxiety towards newcomers and of the diaspora as the young left the Island and generations became fragmented. The participants explored links between the micro and the macro and began to articulate a number of issues: frustration at political failures; struggles with representation: whose voice(s) determined the Island's present and future? Whose history was being articulated and whose heritage was affected? How is Sheppey being constructed in the stories of those outside the Island, (a ‘problem’ community) and how might such ‘othering’ be challenged?

The publication became the subject of major debate on the Island (SECC, 2011). The accounts were about far more than health problems but about the complexities attending health and well-being. This included subtle aspects of community (its potentially excluding, regressive and negative dimensions but also its capacity to be open to others and otherness); and also of the potential of storytelling for individual and collective renewal. One project participant wrote of finding more self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem through being recognised as a valued contributor to the community:

...I have found myself becoming increasingly committed to the project.... I have found that my thoughts on the suggested themes expand daily at an alarming rate and I feel compelled to get my ideas down in writing as soon as I can. I have been inspired to explore new areas and seek the thoughts and opinions, in writing or by way of conversation, of other islanders in a way that I would not have done previously.....we have managed to harness a small portion of the spirit that makes up this particular coastal community.

Members of the group shared material on depression, and its effects, in families. Disturbance was brought into the frame, through interviews and writing, and self-confidence enhanced in the intimacies of the group. Alliances were formed with other projects on the Island, including in local history, to strengthen calls for re-generation. The narratives indicate how research can itself constitute and stimulate new space for democratic experiment, including translating very intimate issues into a language of public concern and action (SECC, 2011).

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Back to the future

Finally, I am researching in Stoke, using narrative interviewing with a range of people, some of whom live in white working class estates in which the BNP has prospered; some within particular Asian communities where there is a problem of fundamentalism. One Asian community leader talked of his concerns about a particular Mosque:

*we shouldn’t shy away from talking about extremism and radicalisation; you know we shouldn’t brush it under the carpet, …. al-Qaeda inspired or Islamic or Far Right, you know they never shy away from using weaknesses which they have identified to propel their own cause; and we are trying to impress on communities actually but you need to be separating them out and looking at some other issues you are facing; it been a learning curve we have had our difficult moments…because the mosque management wasn’t aware of what this group was….It was bought in to Stoke by an individual with family links….but he was an individual who had a very troubled up bringing ….*

This can be seen to mirror processes on particular white working class housing estates, where racism filled a vacuum left by shallow unrepresentative politics, and senses of hopelessness. As one community activist remarked:

*I didn’t like their policies but they worked damned hard for us, they got a lot of stuff for us, for the Abbey, and the BNP members, she still comes and helps at the shop, she helps with the carnival, she comes to our meetings… So there’s people who are absolutely great.*

There has been an intense crisis of Labourist politics across the City, mirrored in an absence of legitimate authority in particular Mosques, where leadership can be poorly educated and disconnected from young people. There is little Labour Party structure on particular estates, and an absence of alternatives. There has been increased community tensions and even the burning and pipe-bombing of mosques. Stoke, we should remember, was once home, poignantly, to a strong adult education and civic culture. Clare White, a WEA organiser observed:

*In the early 2000s, both the City Council and the WEA were heading for crisis. The WEA nearly collapsed and had to undergo major restructuring including the withdrawal from its last physical assets in Stoke-on-Trent, including*
Cartwright House in Hanley and the Wedgwood Memorial College. It had to play it safe for several years... (White, 2011).

New programmes have been established by the WEA in the city, around health and basic education, using lottery money. New space might be claimed with minority groups involved; reflecting on the quality of these spaces will be the subject of further research. As will be the issue of the civic responsibilities of universities in the area; remembering that Keele University was born out of a vibrant adult education tradition, and its first Principal, A.D. (Sandy) Lindsay, believed that universities had a central role in building an educated democracy. He insisted that the failure of German universities to resist Nazism was an element in a descent into barbarism, obsessed as they were with research and narrow specialisation, with minimal engagement in local communities (Phillips, 1980)

Conclusion: recognition, storytelling, private and public space

Crises can present opportunities, if connections between disparate processes are made and better understood. Between the rise of fundamentalism, for instance, and the absence of public space to translate private troubles into a language of inclusive public deliberation; or between increased mental illness and the whole state of distressed communities. Or between space for storytelling – with its potential to symbolise and evoke new understanding of disturbance – and serious, collective thinking about well-being, in communities: where the taken for granted can be disrupted and new understanding and opportunities for renewal realised.

References

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