

Activist Turns Professional: Living the Tensions.

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When practitioners are personally active in struggles or campaigns, tensions arise out of the intersection between radical politics and particular professional practices in the field of Community Education. I will use personal reflections of involvement in political activism and campaigns while completing the Community Education degree in University of Edinburgh to explore what these tensions are and what could be the constructive ways to navigate them.

For the purpose of this article, I will use two ideal roles: 'the activist' and 'the professional'. My aim is not to define and compare these roles exhaustively but rather to use them as a tool to explain and clarify my position. The notion of 'the activist' serves the purpose of conceptualising most of my personal identity and behaviour in the last few years. From a cultural context of grassroots environmental and anti-capitalist (direct) action, I have been involved in student campaigning for environmental and social justice, engaging in actions that range from petitions, media stunts and educational activities to industrial action and occupations.

Yet I chose to do a professional degree about education because I believe the margins are not enough and we ought to infiltrate the system to use its resources to create the world we want to see. Thus from the very beginning of the programme I identified with the radical model (Martin 1987), as opposed to the 'universal' (equal access to services for everybody) and 'reformist' (the attempt to include those excluded in society) models. The radical model is characterised by its criticisms of the current capitalist system as the one creating the conditions for oppression and inequality, that are experienced by most of the target groups that Community Education serves (Fairweather 2011, pp.55-56). Thus interventions are geared towards helping people learn about these structural forces and how to overcome them by creating autonomous networks free of exploitation (Player 1996). The intention is not to engage in an

argument about what model of Community Education is more valid. Countless authors have argued that education is not neutral (Crowther et.al. 2005, De St. Croix 2007, Freire 1972, Kirkwood 1990, Popple 1995, Shaw 2011, Wiggins 2011) but, rather, I am using this article to explore the tensions and intersections that arise out of being a professional with radical politics.

When talking about youth workers, Sercombe (2010) argues that at the core of their professionalism lies the commitment to serve a client group with some vulnerability. It follows that this is a service which benefits the public and society. In this respect, as Banks (2012) explains when talking about social workers, “accountability to service users, the general public, employers and others is an essential feature of developed professions, and specifically public service professions” (Banks 2012, p.2). In practice, this means being able to justify and explain one's actions in relation to the agreed standards and values of the profession. According to the CLD Standards Council for Scotland, these are:

- Self-determination - respecting the individual and valuing the right of people to make their own choices.
- Inclusion - valuing equality of both opportunity and outcome, and challenging discriminatory practice.
- Empowerment - increasing the ability of individuals and groups to influence issues that affect them and their communities through individual and or collective action.
- Working collaboratively - maximising collaborative working relationships in partnerships between the many agencies which contribute to Community Learning and Development, including collaborative work with participants, learners and communities.
- Promotion of learning as a lifelong activity - ensuring that individuals are aware of a range of learning opportunities and are able to access relevant options at any stage of their life. (CLD Standards Council for Scotland 2013)

While these are arguably in line with the radical tradition, the reality of practice presents professionals with difficult choices, the outcomes of which align individuals

towards radical or more reformist/universal positions. Banks (2012) argues that “a key accountability requirement for professionals is that they can demonstrate that their work has both measurable and beneficial outputs (what is actually produced or delivered) and outcomes (the overall effect of what is achieved or delivered)” (p.8). In practice though, differing claims can be made about what is beneficial and how that ought to be measured. Finally, Banks (2012) argues that this professional accountability is what makes social work a profession rather than just a charitable act, and that “the ‘boundaries’ between the personal and the professional realm have always been a site of contestation” (p.10).

As I develop into a professional role, my personal realm (radical politics) and professional accountability have certainly played out this contestation. In order to provide some structure to discuss this contestation, I would like to set out different areas for professional action in the workplace:

1. The patrons (i.e. the state, funders, and any line managers or directors which may be a limiting factor to the work)
2. The relationships with people/clients/service users
3. The purpose of engaging in those relationships

Each of these areas is filled with different types of tensions, but for the purpose of this article, I have chosen to focus on the one that I consider to characterise each area, respectively:

1. The degree of autonomy and the constraints that might make the work disempowering no matter the radical intentions behind it.
2. The notion of expertise and power (and whether such relationships are needed in the learning process).
3. The balance between making change or managing it.

The Tensions: Autonomy and Constraints

The daily life of a professional requires dealing with many constraints. As De St. Croix (2007, p.9) and Kirkwood (1990, p.144) argue, practice is shaped by ideology

in various ways: formalised as 'good practice' guidelines, in the organisational structure, the relationship between users and agencies, the priorities of funders and policy makers, and in the beliefs and values carried by users and professionals themselves. All of these impact on the feasibility and probability of different types of interventions.

Indeed many argue that the issues around professionalism are mainly located in the "state interference and control [that] are corrupting any progressive potential." (Bane 2009, Loughrey 2002, Shaw 2008). In particular, authors criticise bureaucratic policy processes and the shift from locally negotiated plans to centrally determined targets and outcomes (Jeffs and Smith 2008, p.280) which intensify the accountability requirements placed on professionals (Banks 2012, p.2) and thus suffocate more relevant and creative forms of practice. As Meade (2012) argues, "the state seeks not to stop the community sector, but to bring it into line so that it governs and is governed more effectively." (p.902)

Funding is one of the ways in which the state achieves this. Panet-Raymond (1987) describes funding as a time consuming straightjacket, which forces the definition of activities in such a way as to fit with state priorities. For example, at an organisation where I volunteered, a lot of their funding comes from a state agency; thus at least one out of four of their youth group sessions has to be around the related issues that this agency works on. While these sessions can still be delivered in a way that feels relevant to the young people and encourages critical thinking, it is nonetheless an imposed theme that will sometimes clash with the youth workers' and the young people's desires.

Nevertheless, there are certainly benefits in having the status and legitimacy of professional validation, despite these constraints and disadvantages. Aside from the obvious benefits of having access to resources, being seen as a 'professional' is not only useful to negotiate with the state but to communicate with certain groups and individuals who would not otherwise feel comfortable engaging in other autonomous, independent or more radical types of provision. In this light, Shaw and Crowther (1997) argue that even though the degree of autonomy in Community Education has

been affected, “workers still have some room to manoeuvre and create space for more challenging and politically relevant practice” (p.269). This is because “the terminology which constitutes the professional discourse e.g. empowerment, participation and relevance, is sufficiently ambiguous as to be able to support a range of purposes.” (Rosendale 1996, pp.65-66)

There are, then, clear limits as to how much autonomy Community Educators can have; but we must accept these to get access to the people we want to work with and the resources needed to do so (beyond what is possible with the time available to activists in their personal lives). However, it is paramount to always “consider our reasons for doing any work that is neither excitingly educational nor the practice of autonomy and adventure.” (De St. Croix 2007)

Expertise and Power

By the nature of engaging in a specific practice over time, professionals will end up with a degree of expertise in the area they work in. Many people have problematised the idea of people being ‘experts’: it seems to create a distinction between givers and recipients (Kothari 2005) (Illich 1977), “at the expense of more democratic forms of knowledge exchange” (Meade, 2012, p.897). This distinction is problematic because it creates expectations that then influence learners in what they can bring to the learning process, and limits educators in what they can learn from the interaction; this makes the process less valuable and useful.

In a similar way, Kirkwood (1990) argues that “professionalism is theft – the theft of creativity, of co-operative responsibility from those who are supposedly being served with dollops of various public services.” If professionals are seen as experts in a specific area of knowledge, it means that they are the ones that know the solution to be delivered, which keeps people in need of professionals (any kind, not only community educators) because: a. they are not trusted to know what is best for themselves and/or b. they are not helped to figure it out. Community Educators should indeed be experts, but experts on helping people take control of their own lives and learn for themselves, rather than being channels for what others have decided that the users ought to learn or know.

This is probably why Meade (2012) argues that ‘it is difficult to imagine how community work as a process could ever be immune from expertise’. She makes the point that by the very nature of needing to be accountable, professionals ‘must assert some form of expertise in the context of policy, funding or partnership negotiations with the state’(p.900), even though they might negate or disavow such status to engage with the community as equals. However, there are questions about how possible and honest it is for professionals to negate their status, especially when working with vulnerable or young people.

Sercombe (2010) insists that the serving relationship is not equal, and “recognising the power imbalances means you take responsibility for your power in the relationship” (p.13), which need not be oppressive nor dominating. Indeed, it can often be the case that as educators we need to retain authority because sometimes “hierarchies become established via the attempted negation of their very existence”(Scathach 2013, p.3). For example, in much of my youth work experience I have approached interactions with the desire to not exert any control over the group. I felt it would have turned me into yet another figure of control. However, the effect this has often had is that an informal hierarchy has then be an established between the young people under the guise that there is nobody in charge. The same can happen in campaigning groups or learning circles.

From a radical perspective, I would argue that Community education (like popular education) is not an aim but “a method of agitating for conscientisation where the conditions for this don't already exist. This means recognising the goal of popular education as planned obsolescence.” (Scathach 2013, p.4). This is in the sense that, if Community Education seeks to help people take control of their own lives, it follows that they ought to take control to the extent that the role of a Community Educator is no longer needed. However, this is naïve if understood in the short-term: the presence of Community Educators is indeed very much needed today (and for the foreseeable future), when people are subject to internalised oppression (Brookfield and Holst 2011, p.111) and the state owns and controls most of the social resources.

Managing Change – Making Change

While activists' goals are often about change (and systemic change at that) Community Education professionals are often concerned with responding to people's needs. These needs are sometimes defined by practitioners and/or people themselves, although most of the time they come from funders, policies, strategic objectives and recommendations from the government. Of course, from a radical stance people's needs arise out of the structural inequalities of the capitalist system, and thus responding to people's needs must involve some sort of systemic change. However, this does not necessarily alleviate people's immediate circumstances (or go well with most funders) and thus the tension arises as to where energy should go, and how much of it.

Kirkwood (1990) argues that “meeting their needs is an alienated and alienating way of relating to people” (p.147). Instead, he advocates that workers need to move from provision for meeting needs to a dialogue through which to discover and act upon interests and concerns. This is mainly inspired by the tradition of Popular Education (Crowther et al. 2005) and Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 1972), which present us with the idea of education as a means to change the world rather than manage the change it confronts us with. Community education’s goal is then “to support people identifying and challenging the root causes of their poverty and social exclusion” (Rosendale 1996, p.65) hopefully connecting to community organising and social movements.

To do this, however, we must still not forget needs. Rosendale (1996) warns us that it is difficult to move beyond pragmatic and specific problems and solutions, especially when communities expect practical assistance, “and a worker who fails to meet that need will be unlikely to be accepted in a more overtly educational role”(p.66). In my experiences with youth work, young people come to the meeting place with a baggage of what they consider to be relevant and worthwhile. If workers do not respond to that, it is unlikely that they will gain the respect and trust to engage young people in other activities.

Therefore, engaging in a dialogue about people's interests and concerns does mean responding to their perceived needs, at least to some extent. (Shor and Freire 1987). These perceived needs, however, will be influenced by the discourses and the context that surrounds them, and to simply respond to needs without a critical stance will potentially result in “facilitating a process which actually ‘helps people to tolerate the intolerable’ rather than to challenge it” (Shaw 2011, p.14). Examples of these discourses would be the policy emphasis on economic and instrumental models of lifelong learning to the neglect of the personal and democratic aspects (Crowther and Martin 2010); or the increasing focus on the potentially dysfunctional or deviant young person as the purpose of Youth Work (Jeffs and Smith 2008, p.280) instead of understanding the structural inequalities that limit the choices that young people have.

In this article I have argued that, despite the intensified accountability that workers are subject to, with the host of constraining targets and outcomes attached to it, there still seem to be windows of opportunity for radicals to develop work that is not too compromised. However, the tensions that I have outlined can be tiring, frustrating and stressful. It is very easy to say these things on paper with fancy words, but another world altogether to embody them at work where, on top of the aforementioned tensions, you might be surrounded by co-workers and learners who do not come close to sharing any political values with you. In those circumstances pursuing some sort of radical education can feel lonely and scary (let’s not forget the economic climate and the increasingly unstable nature of people’s jobs). De St. Croix (2007) argues that we need to develop collective autonomy as workers, because ‘being part of a collective can address burn-out and isolation, and reduces the ease with which individual ‘troublemakers’ can be targeted by the state’. Examples of this down in England would be the Critically Chatting Collective (2008) and the campaign In Defence of Youth Work (2009), which has increased its activity over the past few months. It is time for Edinburgh to develop similar networks where they don't already exist.

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