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Original Citation

Tett, Lyn (2015) Community-based education and learning. In: Universities and engagement: International perspectives on higher education and lifelong learning. Routledge, London, UK, pp. 130-140. ISBN 9781138824430

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/26111/

Community-based education and learning

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Introduction

This chapter shows the contribution that community-based education can make to adults' learning using a number of examples from practice in order to explore if participating in lifelong learning can contribute to a more equal society. It also examines the role that universities, in partnership with policy makers, practitioners and students, can play in promoting more democratic opportunities. Finally it discusses the role of professional development in enhancing critical engagement. It begins by asking what the term 'community' means in order to explore how different conceptualizations impact on practice in community-based education.

Community

The word 'community' is used in a number of ways but rarely is it seen as anything other than a positive term. As a descriptive category it can be broadly divided into three main areas of meaning:

- Place or locality— this is the most frequently used meaning and refers to people who have in common that they live in a particular geographical community such as a neighbourhood or village.
- Interest — this refers to people who are linked together by factors such as religious belief, sexual orientation or ethnic origin and so they share a common characteristic such as their membership of the Christian, Gay or Chinese communities.
- Function — this refers to groups with the same profession, such as teachers, or the same role, such as community representatives, or those who have common interests such as football, which leads them to acquire a common sense of identity through the actions that they engage in together.

From these uses of the term it can be seen that 'community' involves boundaries because if the members of a group have something in common with each other that is going to distinguish them in a significant way from the members of other possible groups. The boundaries may be physical, religious or linguistic and, as Cohen argues, 'they may [also] be thought of as existing in the minds of the beholders' (Cohen 1985: 12). Community thus implies both similarity and difference and so it is an idea that focuses on relationships. However, it is important to think about how boundaries also construct difference where particular groups such as asylum seekers or disabled people can be seen as people 'to be tolerated as conditional members only' (Shaw, 2008: 29). This suggests that, far from generating positive social relations, community can reinforce 'social polarization and potential conflict' (ibid) as happens in, for example, 'the Mafia'.

Another way of thinking about community is to see it as playing a symbolic role in generating people's sense of belonging. Habermas (1989) has argued that as society is increasingly administered at a level remote from the input of its citizens, individuals draw from custom and cultural traditions to construct their identities, define situations, and create social solidarity. The boundaries between the personal 'life world' of the individual and the 'systems world' of the state and its interventions mean that 'community' represents a form of social organisation that is situated, and mediates, between these two worlds of the public and private and of the individual and society.

So the word 'community' is a difficult notion to understand but remains an idea that is important because it describes something essential and irreducible about the everyday

reality of people's lives and the spaces where those lives are lived. It also means that how we define community and the relationships within communities has strong implications for action. We need to be aware that community is about more than place and is not necessarily inclusive so that we can develop practice that is progressive, emancipatory and dynamic (see Tett, 2010).

Learning in practice

Learning is another term just like 'community' that needs to be carefully defined. My perspective is that learning is a process of acquiring knowledge, skills and understanding that is social because it takes place in interaction with people. Moreover learning always happens in the context of a specific community and society that sets the basic conditions for what learning is possible. As Hodkinson (2004: 7) argues, learning is 'influenced both by the opportunities a person has access to, and also by a person's perception of self, of what they want to be, and of what seems possible'. Thus people bring a particular life history, which influences how they engage with learning through the ways it shapes their expectations, hopes, and aspirations. Illeris (2004) maintains that this multiplicity of complex issues that affect learning coalesce into three dimensions: the cognitive; the social; the emotional; that are always integral to any learning experience. Interventions that aim to promote initial participation in learning and continuing retention should therefore take cognizance of all three dimensions if learners are to have positive, successful experiences of lifelong learning.

There is evidence that engaging in learning can contribute to a more robust and active citizenry through enabling people to review more critically and creatively the values and workings of society and developing mutual tolerance of diversity and difference (see Schuller and Watson, 2009: 180). However, throughout Europe those that have had positive experiences of school education and come from the more advantaged classes are much more likely to participate in learning programmes (Eurostat, 2012). If less advantaged people are to participate then action needs to be taken to provide many opportunities for learning that are accessible and to have a much more open learning environment.

I now turn to three examples from practice to illustrate this: from a family literacy project; a project focused on improving community health; a project aimed at engaging disaffected young adults; to show how learning can be supported and community capacity built.

Family literacy

The impetus for this project was to improve the literacy skills of parents so that they would be more able to help their children with their schoolwork. The approach taken was to build on knowledge that supported what parents already did. Initially, they were encouraged to think critically about their own school experiences in a way that avoided simplistic, pathological, explanations of failure at school. Sharing their negative school learning episodes led to a focus on what made learning difficult whilst positive experiences were used to discuss what made learning easier. Similarly, they were encouraged to identify and value the things they did with their children that helped them to learn. This included teaching their children local songs and games as well as talking about what had happened that day. The emphasis was on the positive ways in which parents already successfully educated their children instead of assuming that parents lacked knowledge and skills that the teacher had to impart. So, the teaching was based on a group process, where the tutor and students learned together, beginning with the concrete experience of the participants, leading to reflection on that experience in order to effect positive change. Sometimes the materials produced by the participants were used to produce group poems around the theme of the discussion so that individual contributions led to a collective, cooperative outcome. On other occasions, the theme generated letters of complaint to the appropriate authorities, for

example, in relation to the removal of racist graffiti. Oral language, especially in relation to story telling and word games, was used to highlight the importance of using the language of the home and the community in other contexts including the school. This approach involved the recognition that some people are at a disadvantage because of the way in which a particular literacy is used in dominant institutions (see Heath, 1983). As the participants gained confidence in their own literacy practices, they were able to interact on a more equal basis with the school's teaching staff, especially in discussing their children's progress. This also required the development of a greater understanding by teachers of what parents needed to know about school practices that was partly achieved through joint training sessions with the family literacy project and school staff. As a result of this project, the participants were able to reflect on their experience and re-evaluate its relevance for their learning. This meant it put them back at the heart of learning as the subjects, rather than the objects, of educational interventions that were supposed to be good for them. Learning then became a shared endeavour between tutors and students, a two-way, rather than a one-way, process (see Crowther and Tett, 2011).

Health

It appears that it is difficult for policy-makers to recognise the political and social determinants of health, and to make the connections between the psychosocial effects of lack of control over the social and material conditions of people's lives, and poor health (Marmot and Wilkinson, 2006). Moreover, there is a pervasive assumption that it is people's individual life styles that need to be changed in order to improve health rather than their social and material conditions. Contesting these official definitions of health is, therefore, a key issue in working with communities on their own health issues. If people feel that they are able to take action about their circumstances and recognise that their problems are not their individual responsibility then much can change. In this section a course is examined called 'Health Issues in the Community' that has involved people from throughout Scotland investigating their concerns about local health issues (see Allan and Tett, 2005). The course provides opportunities for people to express their own views, and to question dominant assumptions and explanations, particularly where they differ from their own experience. It draws on people's lived experience of individual and community health problems to build a learning programme that is based on the issues that are important to them and their communities. This has involved tutors developing a meaningful relationship with each group so that they can negotiate and design a programme that takes account of the influences that impact on them.

One example of a programme that was created by a group and their tutor was one that focused on eating a healthy diet. This was a big issue in the community because the prices for fruit and vegetables in their local shop were expensive and so they could not afford to buy them. The group started by sending out leaflets in their local area giving information about what were healthy foods and then went to their local farmer to buy fruit and vegetables so that they could sell them at cheaper prices. In this way they both informed people about healthier options and enabled them to buy them more cheaply. Another example was a group that sought to challenge the stigma associated with mental health and the medical solutions that were offered to them. Participants in the course initially saw the prevalence of depression in their area as an individual problem but later, through collective action, they set up a Stress Centre where there was somewhere to go to get some support and someone to talk to rather than simply getting medication from their doctor.

The people who participated in this programme involved themselves in action that has enabled them to have their voices listened to about the health issues that are important to them. At the individual level this has raised their self-esteem and confidence as they have

had their voices heard. This in turn has enabled them collectively to have an impact on decision-making and the use and distribution of resources in relation to health.

Engaging young adults

This example comes from a programme aimed at young adults that had left school early and its purpose was to enhance their participation in decision-making. The impetus for the programme was that active participation of young adults in decision-making is vital but their views are often marginalised and this can lead to an emphasis on their problems rather than their contributions. Young adults who come from socio-economically-disadvantaged backgrounds can be particularly subject to social exclusion and two main factors contribute to this. One is their very low income and the other is their absence of 'voice' and both reflect their lack of power to make decisions that affect their lives. Many of the young adults who participated in this project were very conscious of their place in society and were aware that they were seen by others as a nuisance. As a result of interventions by community education staff a group of young adults came together from five different housing estates in Edinburgh to take action about the issues that were important to them. They wrote to their local councillors, the manager of the local Social Inclusion Partnership and their Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) about the lack of services in their area. As a result they were invited to a meeting that enabled them to learn about the proposed regeneration of their area. The young people grasped this opportunity to put forward their ideas for resources and services that they argued should be included in any redevelopment plans. The main areas that they argued for included the setting up a youth café and better access to existing facilities. Participation in this project helped young adults gain: more *confidence* in their own abilities to take decisions; an improved capacity to *communicate* with those in power; greater ability to exercise their role as *citizens*. These young adults participated in doing things that were interesting, relevant and fun and their active engagement in decision-making fostered their capacity and sense of connection, ownership and cohesion in the community (Fyfe 2010).

Supporting Learning

These three examples have shown the importance of listening to local voices and building a programme of learning that assumes that people are knowledge-rich rather than knowing nothing and having to be filled up by the tutor. When tutors create a supportive environment learning opportunities can be maximised through making joint decisions about the content, methods, and activities of the programme and the sharing of experiences. The tutor's task is to negotiate these in interaction with the group, to fine-tune them according to the individuals involved, and to be responsive. When people learn by listening to each other and sharing the problems that affect their learning this type of participation can encourage what Barton and colleagues (2007, 111) call the development of 'social confidence …that concerns not just a person's confidence in what s/he can do, but in who s/he can be in relation to others'.

Education and learning that are rooted in social interests can also represent a resource for people to identify inequalities, probe their origins and begin to challenge them, using skills, information and knowledge in order to achieve and stimulate change. Through this type of learning, the production of knowledge is put back into the hands of people, competing values can be thought about and their relevance for people's lives can be assessed. Clearly, whilst education alone cannot abolish social divisions it can make a contribution to combating them, not least by tackling the ways in which social exclusion is reinforced through the very processes and outcomes of education. People's 'success' or 'failure' in school has a long-lasting effect on how they perceive themselves and are perceived by others (see Crowther and Tett, 2011). Once people and communities are positioned as failures then it becomes difficult to make choices and have their desires fulfilled. However, if they can be helped to

challenge individually-based, deficit views of themselves and their communities then a small step has been taken in enabling their voices to be heard.

Working in partnership

Of course in order to be effective it is necessary to work in partnership so this section explores the benefits and difficulties of collaboration in general and the contribution that partnerships between universities, practitioners and participants make in particular. Partnerships are not easy but bring the following advantages:

- An organisation acting on its own may separately carry out an action or task which need only be done by one partnership. Or activities that are important to the objectives of more than one organisation do not get carried out. Or organisations working in isolation may take actions that conflict with those taken by others.
- Organisations can share resources such as staff, equipment, buildings, and expertise in order to achieve more with less.
- Organisations in partnership can access broader networks or develop a wider curriculum than would be possible if they acted alone.
- Some problems have such wide ramifications for so many sections of society and professional services that they are impossible for one organisation to tackle on its own (see Tett, 2005).

Successful partnership working involves being clear about the purpose of the joint project and then having sufficient time to enable organisations to work together to develop common goals that they are committed to implementing. It also involves an organisational commitment to learning from all the partners and being open to change as a result of such learning (Tett, 2005). In the next section I explore an example from practice in order to see how working in partnership can bring benefits to all the partners.

Anti-racist work

This example from practice involves collaboration between a university, practitioners and communities in confronting the reality of racism and developing a comprehensive and proactive strategy of anti-racist policy and practice. This required making racism visible and recognising it as a daily reality for black and minority ethnic communities. One aspect of this action involved these communities, who are largely marginalised when it comes to having their voices heard, leading the process of shaping future action against racism. It also required members of the white majority community to address their responsibility as citizens to understand racism and counteract it and also to incorporate into policy and practice the voices of those experiencing the adverse effects of racism.

The example studied involved, firstly, university staff engaging in participatory action research with the Black and Ethnic Minority community members and this identified the extent of racist remarks, graffiti, and harassment in the community studied (see Hopkins, 2004). The next stage involved making this research available to the whole community through workshops with the university, practitioners from the Ethnic Minority community and the White majority community. This enabled the recognition of the links between different forms of inequality such as poverty, sexual orientation and disability. The final stage was to organise an antiracist education campaign led by those that had experienced racism and inequality but involving the white majority community. The result of this was that the community became more open to different perspectives and alternative views of the world so that pre-judgements could be challenged and an enriched understanding of others could be developed. The key to the transformation of prejudice lies in developing an understanding that leads people beyond their initial positions to take account of others and develop a richer,

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more comprehensive view. Discussion lies at the heart of learning because through dialogue people learn to take a wider, more differentiated view and thus acquire sensitivity, subtlety and capacity for judgement. Identities are respected and compromises, if not consensus, are reached between rival traditions.

Effective partnerships

The example provided has involved knowledge exchange where the partners have contributed their particular expertise to the debate leading to expansive learning. The university has contributed its research knowledge and has learnt from proactively engaging with the lived experience of practitioners and participants. Individuals and groups have been involved in making things happen rather than being told what to do by 'experts' or having things happen to them and this has been achieved through dialogue rather than through pre-established and arbitrary forms of power. When people create their own knowledge and have their voices heard, narrow definitions of what is thought to be 'educated knowledge' and who it is that makes it, are thrown into question. In this way the experiences and stories that have been excluded, and the mystification caused by 'expert' knowledge, can be interrogated as a way of articulating views that come from below rather than above. This is important 'because, in identifying and making spaces where alternative ways of thinking and being can be worked up, such practices increase the possibilities of knowledge — that is knowledge that is useful to those who generate it' (Barr, 1999: 82).

Effective partnership working takes account of the wishes and circumstances of everyone rather than matching perceived problems with a standard model of support leading to synergy of purpose. By combining knowledge, resources, approaches and operational cultures, partner organisations will be able to achieve more together than they could on their own. Moreover, exposing the different partners to the assumptions and working methods of their collaborators has challenged their 'common sense' knowledge.

Professional development

In order to work in ways that encourage critical approaches it is important that there is a commitment to professional development at both the institutional and individual level. Universities have an important role to play both as providers of professional development for community educators and as participants in institutional and individual development. If the focus of professional development is on embedding self-evaluation this means that the process is owned by the institution, group or individual rather than imposed from outside. Using the following six key questions (adapted from HMIE, 2006) will allow universities to check that their approach has enabled a self-evaluation process to be embedded.

1. *What key outcomes have we achieved*? This involves taking a broad, long-term perspective that focuses on the organisation's successes in improving the quality of its work, both overall and in comparison with other providers.
2. *What impact have we had in meeting the needs of our stakeholders*? This area involves looking at the benefits that stakeholders derive from the services delivered by the organisation. It will need to take into account stakeholders' views, together with evidence from direct observation and quantitative data, in order to arrive at overall judgements of the impact on its key stakeholders.
3. *How good is our delivery of key processes*? This area builds upon the processes that effective practitioners employ to achieve maximum impact in their work.
4. *How good is our operational management*? This aspect focuses on the operational activities necessary to ensure effective and efficient delivery including the provider's processes for developing and updating policies, for involving its stakeholders, for operational planning, for managing staff, finance and resources and for developing productive partnerships.

5. *How good is our strategic leadership*? This area focuses on the strategic direction of the organisation and its partners. It looks at their corporate purpose and the expression and delivery of their aspirations by means of strategic planning with partner agencies and the community. It considers the quality of leadership at strategic level, and within teams and organisational units.

6. *What is our capacity for improvement*? The judgement of an organisation's ability for improvement takes into account the evaluations arrived at in the other areas with particular reference to the quality of the leadership and management of the provider and overall impact and outcomes. The provider's focus on improvement and its track record in bringing about improvement are particularly important, as is the accuracy of its self-evaluation, which is used as the basis for planned improvements. The judgement also takes into account any significant aspects of the internal or external context. The judgement reviews the past, and looks forward to the future.

At the individual professional level a learning culture needs to be encouraged. This means that people are committed to their own growth and development as professionals, apply their learning in reflective practice, manage conflicting interests and focus on evolving more open, participatory and democratic relationships between educators and their constituencies. The self-evaluating professional needs to be committed to more democratic and equal ways of working with their partners and stakeholders and also to continuous improvement. In today's knowledge society universities have a key role to play in social networking based on their role as both communicators of knowledge and also as innovators. This sets the context in which the self-evaluating professional works and requires an openness to opportunities to engage with the widest possible range of stakeholders in their networks. The principal motivator for professionals is to make a difference in the lives of the people that they work with and for this reason alone there is a strong professional obligation to regularly evaluate and enquire into the effect of their practice on the individuals and groups with whom they are working. This also needs to include reviewing their own taken for granted assumptions and this is extremely difficult to do by oneself. Ideally groups of professionals should be able to work together to challenge each other to improve their practice. This means that the professionals within the university become a learning community in which the motivation to learn is mutually developed and maintained. This involves accepting a set of attributes, values and practices that support a continuous process of learning for an organisation and its members.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that learning is located in social participation and dialogue as well as in the heads of individuals and that 'teaching and learning [should] not [be treated] as two distinct activities, but as elements of a single, reciprocal process' (Coffield, 1999: 493). The practical examples have demonstrated that education can contribute to the extension of social democracy but this requires the valuing of difference as well as the need for shared understanding and agreement. People's experiences and their own definition of their needs are central to the organisation and delivery of appropriate education and learning. People themselves can develop their own forms of knowledge and this challenges the power of expert knowledge to monopolise the definition of what is wrong with them and their communities and what is needed to make it right. Having a greater say in services is important, but being treated as capable citizens, with a right to dissent from provided solutions, is much more empowering and can lead to democratic renewal for all people (see Tett, 2010).

Learning programmes that address the concerns of ordinary people and actively draw upon their experience as a resource for educational work in communities increases the

possibilities of developing knowledge that is useful to those who generate it. People then act both as experts regarding their own lives and as generalists too, commenting on others' blind spots about the root issues and the causes of problems in communities. Non-specialists should have a role in critiquing the views of experts' blind spots however expertise is defined. So collaborative partnerships between universities, practitioners, policy-makers and students can be really effective. Such collaboration should also focus on professional development to ensure that self-evaluation, which leads to more effective professionals, is embedded into the practices of institutions and individuals.

This means that we need to be open to mutual recognition of the different perspectives and ways of seeing the world that we bring and to be prepared to challenge and debate. We should be collaborating in providing education that moves away from individualised, deficit models of learning and brings about change in understanding both self and society that leads on to a more equitable life for everyone.

> Even a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. It causes a smouldering discontent…and produces a demand, however stammering, for more interests and chances. Where we see ferment, there has been some of the yeast of education (Margaret Davies, 1913: Quoted in Scott, 1998: 56).

Having such a vision before us helps us to take those steps that in the end make a broad path as we walk towards a more democratically just society.

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