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Tett, Lyn

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Original Citation

Tett, Lyn (2016) Community-based learning and research: partnerships, power and learning. Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 18 (1). pp. 6-16. ISSN 1466-6529

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/27868/

Community-based learning and research: partnerships, power and learning

Lyn Tett, University of Huddersfield

Email: l.tett@hud.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper discusses a learning and research partnership between a university and a community group that was studying the health issues in their community. It is based on a 'knowledge democracy' approach, where the importance of multiple ways of knowing is foregrounded. It uses a framework derived from Starhawk (1987) to explore how power might be shared and how difficult it can be to avoid exercising power in hidden, rather than overt, ways. It shows that all the participants in the programme eventually became part of a 'community of practice' through sharing power but also outlines the challenges to working in collaborative partnerships. It concludes that it is possible to intentionally link the values of democracy and action to the process of producing and using knowledge, but this requires considerable effort from all parties.

Key words: power; knowledge democracy; community-based learning

Introduction

Community-based learning and research is an important aspect of universities' mission to fulfil their civic responsibility of serving their communities. However, rather than seeing this as a partnership between equals, the university can hold the power to define the learning, identify the research problem, generate the data, carry out the analysis and act on the resultant findings whilst the community is simply the location for the research. In these circumstances staff in universities may forget that the community is a source of important knowledge. An alternative way of operating would be to take a 'knowledge democracy approach' (Tandon and Hall, 2014) that acknowledges the importance of multiple ways of knowing and especially values marginalised and excluded knowledges. From this perspective knowledge is both created and represented in multiple forms and is seen as a powerful tool for taking action to deepen democracy.

In this paper I will focus on a Scottish programme called 'health issues in the community' that adopts a different approach to knowledge generation. It involves adults from throughout Scotland investigating their concerns about local health issues. Local people use their lived experience of problems in their communities to investigate the health issues that they think are having a negative impact on their lives. Once a group has identified which health issue to investigate, then the university's role is to help them carry out the research that will help define the problem. I will use a case study from this programme in order to explore an alternative way of using research and learning to promote social inclusion through an approach that puts a community's understandings at the heart of the process. I will also show that there are many obstacles to sharing power, but first I explore the relationship between partnership-working, power and learning.

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Partnerships, power and learning

A learning and research partnership between a university and its local community around health issues should be a helpful way of promoting community democracy. However, partnerships between community groups and universities are not easy because of a number of inherent hazards such as rivalries about the focus or unrealistic expectations about the outcomes. Yet they bring a number of advantages including the sharing of resources and expertise, as well as accessing broader networks than would be possible if the partners acted alone. Research shows both that partnership working which takes account of the wishes and circumstances of everyone, rather than matching perceived problems with a standard model of support, is more likely to lead to synergy of purpose and also that by combining knowledge, resources, approaches and operational cultures, partner organisations are able to achieve more together than they could on their own (Tett, 2005). Moreover, exposing the different partners to the assumptions and working methods of their collaborators will challenge their 'common sense' knowledge. However, there are problems in implementing such an approach especially in the current circumstances where individualised managerialist cultures make it difficult for academics to work collaboratively and share power (Deem, Hilliard & Reed, 2007).

In the rest of this paper I will use a case study of a particular partnership between myself as a university researcher and a community group studying a course on health issues in order to explore how different forms of power are enacted and experienced and what lessons I learned in the process. As an educator who works with adults, I liked to think that I operated in a relatively power-free way. However, I learnt that no forms of education are cushioned from social and economic struggles for power. Rather I found that power is enacted in and around all the educational contexts in which learning is located. Cervero and Wilson (2001: 11) argue that the struggle for power 'requires us to recognise that adult learners exist in the structurally defined hierarchies of everyday life …Thus they enter this process marked by their location within larger systems of power and privilege that have shaped their experience'.

A body of literature that focuses specifically on power and learning (Brookfield, 2005; Cevero & Wilson, 2001; Foucault 1980, 1982; hooks 1998; Luttrell, 1996) critiques unequal tutor/student relationships largely through pedagogical and epistemological lenses. This literature shows that social and institutional structures locate teachers in defined hierarchical positions that axiomatically endow them with power over 'their' learners. Drawing from the work of Foucault, Brookfield (2005) argues that regardless of intent, of progressive pedagogies, or of emancipatory ideologies, power is omnipresent, whether we choose to use, abuse or share it with students, and whether it is externally imposed or internally regulated through surveillance and self-discipline. Quoting from Foucault, he states that:

> The omnipresence of power means we have to accept that all of us, at all times, are implicated in its workings. We must accept that "power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network". (Brookfield 2005: 130)

As the 'social body' constructs people/power hierarchies, so it also constructs knowledge/power hierarchies where certain codified knowledges are deemed more valuable than others. So the educator, as both a person in the structural hierarchy and

as a holder of valued knowledge, is the cultural embodiment of the confluence of the two manifestations of power. S/he is therefore in a position of great power, but this may not be recognised.

One reason for this is that we often mistake particular methodologies, such as the discussion circle, as inherently democratic. What we forget is that this format has simply reconfigured power behind 'surface forms and processes that appear to be free' (Brookfield, 2005: 122). Indeed, the power of the discussion leader to indicate approval by nods, eye contact and comments means that a particular type of discourse is privileged and, rather than there being an open discussion, it is in fact highly controlled by the tutor. So what might appear to be participatory practices may inadvertently reinforce the discriminatory practices educators try to challenge. This power dimension is particularly foregrounded when working with people whose previous experiences have told them that they cannot easily learn new things. These experiences have been mainly derived from poor experiences of compulsory schooling and/or unhappy childhoods that, as many studies have found (see Barton et al, 2007; Cieslik, 2006; Tett, 2014; Worthman, 2008), have left them with not only low literacy skills but also low self-confidence.

In order to explore the power dimensions of this university/community partnership I am going to use a framework for understanding power derived from Starhawk (1987). I will use it to examine and learn from the difficulties I experienced in sharing power with this particular community of learners. Starhawk's framework comprises three kinds of power: power-over, power-with and power-within. As a tutor/researcher I have all these types of power and in addition hold the power derived with my position because this gives me the formal authority over others to determine the research agenda and curriculum content. *Power-over* is defined as the situation where people have power over others and this is sustained by social, economic and political systems and by policies and assumptions about which groups have a right to hold power. *Power-with* is about one's influence in a group and is based on respect, not for the role or position, but for the person as an individual who can make suggestions, and be listened to, as one amongst equals. I can only have this power if my fellow learners know me as a person that they can trust. *Power-from-within* comes from being able to say 'I can' and is about a belief in our capacities to use and develop our skills, knowledge and attributes and offer them to others. This kind of power assumes that different people have different kinds of knowledges but that all can contribute equally to the project being achieved.

Health issues in the community

The 'health issues in the community programme' is a partnership between a university, a national community health agency and local adult education organisers. The university provides staff that can help community groups develop expertise in conducting research; the local adult educators identify and recruit people from their communities that have an interest in investigating health issues and act as tutors for part of the programme; the health agency provides open learning materials about health inequalities and (optional) accreditation for the participants in the course. Groups of around 12 people work together on the ten week course and a key aspect is an investigation by the group of a health issue that they have identified as important. The course has been followed by groups throughout Scotland and has often acted as a

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first step back into education for people whose earlier experience of schooling has been negative.

In the course health is widely defined to include social, mental and physical health, and the emphasis is on the structural factors that cause ill-health based on the social model of health. It focuses on the research finding that poor health and premature death is caused by inequality and poverty and the ways in which these material conditions cause psychosocial stress in early life (e.g. Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). It discusses how these stresses translate into inequalities at birth that are exacerbated in later life because the most advantaged social groups use universal medical services more and so they are less available to those that are poorer. It is explained that this 'inverse care law' (Tudor Hart, 1971) operates because more advantaged groups have better access to the resources of time, finance, and coping skills than those who are poor. The outcome of this is that advantaged people are able to avail themselves of help to, for example, give up smoking and can also access preventive services such as immunisation, dental check-ups and cervical screening more easily (Macintyre, 2007: 8). A further focus of the course is on the place where people live because this also has a fundamental impact on the quality and meaning of their day-to-day life and health. These include social relations with people, the physical fabric of the locality and the local geographies of services and facilities. Research shows that, in combination, features of place can be either sustaining or undermining of psychosocial well-being and health (Gattrell et al, 2000: 166).

These understandings of health inequalities are discussed in the course in the context of the lived experience of the participants. The curriculum is then developed from the health issues that have been identified as causing problems in the group's community, in order to investigate what they think should be the solution. The course is particularly effective in bringing about change as it provides opportunities for people to conduct research and present their findings to key local policy makers in ways that are designed to raise the issues, move them up the policy makers' agendas and suggest solutions to the problems identified. Topics that have been investigated include: poverty; housing; support for people that care for elderly family members; children's play facilities; availability of fresh fruit and vegetables; racism; coping with stress; the impact of pollution. Once a group has identified which health issue to investigate, my role is to help them carry out the research that will help define the problem. I see this as a process where the different parties bring different kinds of knowledge. These knowledges are focused around the technicalities of research processes on my part and on their part the experiential knowledge of the health issues in the geographical community in which they live.

However, trying to do this in a way that did not privilege my codified, powerful knowledge over their experiential knowledge was difficult. In the next section I will work through the process that I took with one group. This group of ten people came from a small town in the East of Scotland and they were all mothers of young children. They knew each other well as they had all gone to their local community centre with their children. All except two were in their early twenties with the other two in their early thirties. Only one person in the group had any post-school education, having gone to her local college to qualify as a hairdresser. The health issue that they were focussing on was the lack of safe play facilities in their area. In the rest of the paper I will explore the mistakes I made in trying to move from a position of 'power-over' to 'power-with' this group.

Learning to share power

I found sharing power much more difficult than I expected even though I was committed to a democratic process of negotiation. The main problem was that I had a tendency to thrust responsibility onto the group rather than gradually devolving decision-making power. For example, the group decided that the first step they should take was to investigate the play spaces that were available in the area and we had a brainstorming session to identify the questions that should be asked in order to get the views of local people. I acted as scribe for this on the grounds that many of group were not very confident about their literacy skills and also so that they could focus on the discussion. I had forgotten though that standing in front of the group and writing gave me a really powerful position. This was because it both set me apart and also shaped the discussion through the words that I wrote down. However, at the time no one in the group pointed out my dominant position. What happened was that the group started off by going over the reasons why play spaces were important for their children and the problems with their housing estate of litter, dog poo and needles. This was a lively discussion but no one came up with actual questions. When I tried to get people to focus more on how to ask about where would be a good play space, fewer and fewer people contributed. Later I was able to see that these silences were the main way in which they could indicate their lack of agreement. Starhawk notes that:

> An empowering group does not thrust responsibilities on people
> without preparation, but creates situations in which information, skills,
> and the knowledge gained by experience can be passed on (1987: 272).

I was trying to devolve power by thrusting it onto people without preparation and actually using my position-power to force a decision about what should be included in the questionnaire. However, the group did not yet want to make this decision because, I discovered later, they were not clear about what they should ask other members of their community. Rather they wanted to discuss this amongst their family and friends in an informal way first.

In the next session several members of the group reported that they had been having these informal discussions just to see what reactions they had from those they knew well. They said that it was easier than asking strangers formal questions and more likely to give them real ideas. After this the whole group were able to chip in with their views about what kinds of play spaces would be best and where they might fit into the town without too much cost and disruption. I found this discussion really interesting, but rather than letting the group develop it further I thought that they should now carry on to develop a more formal questionnaire. In the earlier brainstorming session two of the students had been clear about what they thought should be asked about the play spaces, and suggested that it would be easiest to get everyone in the group to ask their own neighbours and family members where there were spaces that could be used to create small play areas. I therefore tried to get them to take the lead. However, this was also unhelpful, because it required them to move from being part of the group of students into being more allied with me as the tutor. What this meant was that I was merely trying to make a shift in who had 'power-over', rather than initiate a shift to 'power-with'. In both these sessions the students

were reluctant to speak up about their views. When I asked them about this in a later discussion, they said it was because they worried that they might differ from mine and thought that I was asking them to second-guess what was the right answer! Clearly the differences in our 'position-power' had silenced them. I realised that I needed to create a safe environment where the group could risk speaking about their own views in contradiction to mine, in spite of these power differences. This meant that I had to really listen to their silences and learn from these unspoken thoughts. I also needed to be aware that, as Foucault argues, 'there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations are exercised' (1980, 142). So the silences were examples of resistance to my 'power over' the student group.

In these first two sessions, when I attempted to devolve power to the group, students voiced their responses among themselves rather than raise them when we met and, given my position power, this silence is not surprising. Ellsworth (1989) suggests that differences in people's power will consciously or unconsciously influence their decisions to speak. To speak up at the meetings would have meant publicly disagreeing with me. Creating safe environments where people can risk speaking in spite of power differences is essential if power is to be shared. In the questionnaire discussion, I did nothing to invite dialogue or to make it safe and comfortable for people to express their views. To listen is to be on an equal footing: listening means putting yourself into the place of the other.

According to Starhawk, power-with is one's influence in a group. It is 'the power of a strong individual in a group of equals, the power not to command, but to suggest and be listened to...' (1987: 10). Power-with is based in respect, not for the role or position, but for the person. Norton (2001) suggests that personal power is increased when educators become real persons to learners and feelings of friendship and loyalty develop. In the group we began to achieve this by finding opportunities to relax and talk over the issues outside our formal meeting place. This was because this formal space was seen as belonging to me, rather than them, and so once we were in places that were more familiar to them and more open, our relationship changed. One opportunity was when the group took me around their town to show me all the sites that could potentially be play areas. Taking time to get to know each other through the site visits was a step on the way to our becoming more equal, especially in relation to the different knowledges we had. These site visits provided an opportunity for the students to introduce me to other family members and friends who we met as we walked around the town and so we could chat together as equals. It also provided a way in which I was able to gain more understanding of the web of relationships that were operating in this community where most people had lived for several generations.

However, there were times when I had to exercise my position-power openly and responsibly. For example I had technical expertise about research methods and data analysis. It was important that I was clear about this and explained what I thought would work. This included, for example, what it was possible to ask in questionnaires and the importance of deciding in advance how the resulting data could be analysed. I had this insight into how I was exercising my power after spending some time asking leading questions that presumed the group would eventually realise the 'right' answer. This was really another way of asserting my 'power-over' rather than seeking 'power-with' and could be seen as a form of manipulation. Arnstein (1969) suggests that manipulation is a form of non-participation that substitutes for genuine participation

and enables 'power holders to "educate" participants or engineer their "support"' (1968: 217).

As I recognised the negative impact of my habit of asking leading questions, I began to state my views directly and my ideas were taken up or not, depending on whether people valued them. What I had to be very clear about was why I was suggesting things should be done in a particular way rather than simply relying on my research expertise to assert my authority. Power-with began to emerge once I was able to acknowledge that the people in the group had abilities, interests, talents and knowledge about who they could ask questions of, where they could be found and what questions might be difficult to ask, including direct questions about what age group people belonged to. What finally worked in this devolving of power was when we all spent time working out as equals what we wanted to ask, and then finding a way of analysing these questions. This involved first the students getting together in small groups and pooling their knowledge of what their family, friends and neighbours had said when asked what they thought about more play spaces. Then, on the basis of these answers, we all worked together to turn them into simple questions. Finally these were formulated into a number of simple yes/no questions in a format that could be easily analysed. This process then became a genuine collaboration and meant I was able to shift from a power-over to a power-with position. So we were able to bring our different knowledges together as part of a community of practice.

Learning as social practice

As I have shown, creating a supportive environment where learning opportunities can be maximised through making joint decisions about content, methods, and activities and sharing experiences is not easy. My task was to negotiate the curriculum in interaction with the group, to fine-tune it according to the individuals involved, and to be responsive to the students. Students were encouraged to learn by listening to each other talk about their home and community lives and other factors that matter to them, by sharing the problems that affect their learning and by carrying out the research that would enable them to change the issues that had an adverse impact on their lives. 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'.

Learning is this way has been extensively examined in the work of Etienne Wenger (1998, 4-6) where he characterises social participation as a process of learning and knowing that presupposes action and participation. The components of his model stress the following:

Meaning: is characterised as a way of talking about our changing ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful. In this project the action that people were taking together to improve access to play spaces was meaningful because it addressed a problem that had been impacting on their own health and that of their children.

Practice: is characterised as a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, *frameworks*, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action. In this project our time together as we walked around the community enabled

us to develop a mutual perspective, which in turn enabled the taking of collective action.

Community: is *characterised* as a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognised as competence. By the end of the project we had all come to see ourselves as equals with different kinds of knowledges that we had used together to demonstrate our competence.

Identity: is characterised as a way of talking about how learning changes whom we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of communities. By the end of the project the whole group of us had come to see ourselves as people that had the power to use and develop our different skills, knowledge and attributes and offer them to others in ways that we had not been confident to do at the beginning.

Another aspect of the way in which identities had been changed in relation to our competence was through the valuing of the expertise that we had acquired. This was through our shared understandings of conducting research as well as the personal and social experience we brought and this meant we were able to negotiate new learning identities as people who knew and understood and could therefore take action to change things. As Bartlett (*2007*, 53) argues 'individuals make claims about who they are by aligning and contrasting themselves with others' and becoming part of a community of practice that was orientated towards learning had positive effects on participants' ability to engage. This in turn had a strong impact on those members of the group that had seen themselves mainly through the lens of school failure and instead repositioned them as capable learners. They came to see themselves as familiar with learning and that this learning was usable in their everyday lives, whereas beforehand their image of themselves had been that formal learning was, to use Wenger's (1998, 153) words, 'foreign', 'opaque' and 'unwieldy'. The students had also become co-producers of meaning, particularly as they had conducted their investigations of the health issues in their communities and then taken action to bring about change.

Because, from this perspective, learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind, it means that what is learnt is mediated by the differences of perspective among the co-participants. It is the community, or at least those participating in the learning context, that 'learn' under this definition. Learning is distributed among co-participants, not a one-person act. All learning 'takes place in a *social world*, dialectically constituted in social practices that are in the process of reproduction, transformation and change' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, 123). Moreover, this world is affected by different understandings of knowledge and what knowing is about but, as I have shown, these evolve in the face of events and reflections on these events. In this project the shared goal – to improve children's play spaces – and the necessity of working together to achieve it were important in building a community of practice in which all of us were able to participate as full members.

Conclusion

Sharing power is not easy and, as can be seen, the group encountered many challenges along the way. These included trying to work collaboratively where

different people had conflicting views about what they felt should be done. This meant that we had to work hard to get to know each other and be able to challenge each other as equals who all had something to contribute. Another problem we faced was deciding who would be taking responsibility for investigating the issues in ways that built on people's strengths but also enabled us all to take some risks. A particular risk for me as a researcher was how to be part of a group that was an advocate for a particular view and looked for evidence to support this position. I had to realise that I could contribute evidence from external knowledge of the literature to help situate the problem, but we also needed to draw on the experiential knowledge of the group about what the issues were in the community and how they might be solved. Similarly for the students sharing more equitable power relations was also risky, as it placed them in a position where they had to give up the idea that the 'expert' was always the outside educator and learn to acknowledge their own expertise. This was particularly difficult for those who had experienced their schools as places where they survived by passively being told what to think, rather than actively participating.

Helping to create a situation where all are able to claim their power-from-within through acting together to create a learning community can be a transformative process. However, there are many challenges that must be overcome before this participative process can be realised through the processes of social learning. I have found that sharing power is difficult and has to be thought through carefully, since it is easy to fall into the trap of asserting power over people in hidden, rather than overt, ways. Moving to power-from-within involves valuing different knowledges, coming together to share and use these understandings and taking risks that all of us will find difficult at times.

I have also tried to show that, by working in partnership, it is possible to intentionally link the values of democracy and action to the process of producing and using knowledge. From this perspective the university would learn from proactively engaging with the lived experience of practitioners and communities, and these groups in turn would be able to share the research expertise of the university. In a 'knowledge democracy' approach individuals and groups would be involved in making things happen rather than being told what to do by 'experts' or having things happen to them. 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).

Acknowledgements

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