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The impact of Brexit in community youth work and play sectors

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Net's UNITE Union Community Play Workers Conference Talk

4th Nov. 2017 B'ham

(delivered remotely from home via live link)

Hi all.... so today I have been asked to talk about the impact of Brexit on the Youth Work Sector and then hopefully this will stimulate some conversation in the room.

Firstly, I better tell you a bit about Sinead and me. Both qualified community educator with around 35 years of experience in working with communities of all shapes and sizes, across the UK and internationally our practice has largely...but not always... been set in youth work contexts.

Our practice has included universal or generic settings, issue and project based work in areas of equality and social justice; international exchanges; street-based, semi-detached and school based settings, adult literacies and wider community development contexts.

Sinead's PhD examined the relationship between youth gangs and their local communities and my own examined learning about equality in a case study of open access youth work. Our academic teaching and research interests are focused on theory and practices in Community Development, Youth Work, and are underpinned by core drivers in Equality, Social Justice and Human Rights.

We have worked in four Universities...Hull, Strathclyde, and currently Glasgow and UWS, all of which have informed our perspectives on Brexit...which means that although our articles are largely Scotland focused, we feel sure the questions raised will resonate across the UK and perhaps also across the EU.

At the very start I also need to give you a word of warning – we don't know what is going to happen for definite with Brexit, in fact it clear that none of us do!But what Sinead and me are seeking to do is to share our best guess ideas drawn from research information. What we want today to be about is not a picture of doom and gloom but a coming together with cautious optimism about what our future could, potentially, look like. So....

We were asked by Youth Link to prepare a briefing for MSPs and other key people or organisations....on the impact of leaving the EU on the Youth work Sector in Scotland. So moving to slide 2 you can see the 6 key findings we identified from that research:

1. Youth work has faced continual resourcing reduction across the UK and in Scotland (Unison, 2016a; 2016b)
2. Youth work has reached a 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2000)
3. Capacity of youth workers stretched from impact of austerity measures
4. Further funding reduction from Brexit will impact on CPD opportunities
5. Reduction in available spend would impact on the current social return that youth work contributes in the Scottish economy and to our young people
6. There is a need for further dialogue with the youth work sector to establish a renewed creative, resilient and strong sector, in response to Brexit

Of course...most of this not new, surprising or ground breaking to any of us but...when we presented our initial paper at a YouthLink Policy forum in March of this year, what was surprising was that the topic of Brexit was, at best not featuring in youth work conversations among youth workers, nor in routine dialogue with young people participating in youth work...and at worst....staff in both statutory and voluntary/community or Third Sector organisations had been instructed NOT to discuss Brexit as it was too hot a topic...that had achieved a forbidden or taboo status, on grounds that it was likely to cause too much conflict and in crossing personal, professional, and political boundaries

Our session had used a statements call-out exercise to prompt discussion and despite holding very different perspectives on the subject, no one fell out, no one attacked anyone and no one left the room feeling ostracised for holding a different opinion. In fact the 50 or so practitioners said they welcomed the chance to talk openly and believed that they should be having such conversations with young people. Seven months later, testing this out with students at each of our universities...the status quo remains!

So the aim for to-day is to go through three key areas which will include the key points we identified in the initial briefing and in our recent article in the Journal of Youth and Policy.

So...**Moving to slide 3**, in seeking to consider the impact of leaving the EU on Youth work we focus on:

1. Firstly, our context and Brexit....to provide an overview of where we think we are at and the challenges we face as community, play and youth work practitioners (and our position on this is that our different practices are interlinked, collaborative and boundary crossing)
2. Secondly, our use of 'tipping point' and threshold concepts as a way of analysing our current situation
3. Thirdly, we are going to get you thinking about the 'youth work we want'

So...Moving to slide 4....the Context and Brexit

In 23rd June 2016, 52% of the UK electorate who turned out to vote stated their wish to leave the European Union. Whether this was a protest vote, an anti-establishment vote or a vote of no confidence in the EU, the impact will be long lasting.

The image on the left in your ppt paper, was taken in Copenhagen in 2015 when myself and Sinead were at a conference and saw this poster floating in a puddle. We stopped and laughed thinking wow... the EU are ahead with their discussions on this. Brexit was something that neither of us had anticipated nor at that stage particularly thought about in great detail. We were clearly wrong on that.... But to-day is not about a pro or anti Brexit debate, instead we very clearly take the stance that we are where we are...and as a community of practice.... we need to ask – what do we do now? So....

Young people will arguably feel this impact more acutely than many, particularly given that 'under-25s were more than twice as likely to vote Remain (71%) than Leave (29%)' (Moore, 2016). In this referendum, as the age of the voter went up, so too did the likelihood of voting to leave, with over 65s twice as likely to vote leave, than remain. Drawing on Bruter and Harrison (2016) Helm reported that 'the referendum stimulated feelings, particularly among young people, of "sadness but also ones of anger and frustration at people who voted to leave, and often at older generations"' (Bruter and Harrison, in Helm, 2016).

The impact of leaving the EU on the youth work sector thus remains unknown and unpredictable. What is known (**and shown on the image on the right**).... is that youth work across the UK has experienced a steady range of cuts in public funding since the current economic crisis began in 2008 (Unison, 2016a). It is also known that young people have been disproportionately affected by this economic crisis where unemployment is higher than for any other age group (Unison, 2016a); they are in more precarious jobs, have lower wages, and are 'torn between their aspirations...and their need for income' (Standing, 2011, p.74).

Further, the European Commission (2014) has identified that, 'there is a growing use and reliance in EU level support and financing for the youth work sector as other sources of funding at national level are reduced' (p. 12). In our briefing, we adopted a contribution analysis (Mayne, 2012) as a logical method for informing understanding of what might reasonably be possible in the future. However, what was planned and what actually happens may be quite different. Illogical or unexpected events can redefine aspirations and make it difficult to develop a logical pathway for change. Thus, as a specific measure or predictor of the future, contribution analysis is flawed. So, in these times of uncertainty, with increased demand on youth work to engage young people in times of deep-rooted economic crisis, 'there is pressure to do more with either the same or less funding than before' (European Commission, 2014, p.13).

We know that within this context youth work has taken a huge hit. Unison (2016a, p.4) estimate that '...between April 2010 and April 2016, £387m was cut from youth service spending across the UK' the impact on sustaining quality youth work provision is becoming more difficult. In Scotland, a survey carried out by Unison (2016b, p.4) on the impact of austerity on youth workers found that '79% of those who responded stated that there had been cuts or severe cuts to their team budgets this year, 82% said the same about "last year" and 83% said cuts or severe cuts over the last five years'.

Applying the logic model, if EU funding for youth work projects and youth exchanges are no longer available to the Scottish sector, it could be argued that the contribution of youth work to enhancing young people's capacity for social and cultural connectedness, for

understanding and accepting difference, and for using such experiences in formation of their own identity, would be clearly impacted.

Of course, EU funding for youth work is only part of the story in considering its value.

So..moving to slide 5 we drew on work, Commissioned by YouthLink Scotland, whereby Hall Aitken (2016) estimated that the social return on investment in youth work contributes £656 million to the Scottish economy and shows a return of £7 for every £1 of public cash. Their findings show that:

- Youth work has made a major difference to the lives of over 450,000 people in Scotland today (over 13% of the Scottish population)
- The confidence and motivation that youth work develops is rated by 85% of employers as very important compared with 27% rating qualifications this way
- The social return on investment of youth work is at least 3:1

Thus, a reduction in available spend, which might be reasonably anticipated in a Post-Brexit scenario, to impact on the current social return that youth work contributes in the Scottish economy and to our young people.

Thresholds and Threshold contexts....slide 6

These images offer a visual explanation of our argument that youth work is at a 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2000), that moment of critical mass, a threshold, a boiling point. In other research from the university of Hull, which can also be found in the journal of youth and policy, Hughes et al, (2015) found that workers were at risk of burnout through the self-sacrifice they were giving to the field in an environment of limited resources. Something which I am sure you are all too aware of.

Drawing on Land et al (2010) who identify the need for Threshold concepts as a means of assisting people in established contexts to change....we have argued in Graham Bright's book on youth work, history, policy and contexts, and in our own recent book, that CYW is already in a liminal state and ready for a fundamental shift. Threshold Concepts' may be

considered to be “akin to passing through a portal” or “conceptual gateway” that opens up “previously inaccessible way[s] of thinking about something” (Meyer and Land 2008). Land, Meyer and Baillie (2010) argue that, just as passing through a doorway or ‘portal’ enables new perspectives to come into view, some concepts help us to take a step forward in seeing things differently.

These images are left...a big door at Muncaster Castle in Cumbria and Cushenden Caves in Northern Ireland (aka Stormlands in GoT) but you get the idea...until you cross the thresholdyou really can't know or be sure of that lies beyond it....so sometimes we need help to go transform our professional practice and need a wee bit of help...we have suggested (again in our book!!! Sorry) that a Critical border crossing/boundary crossing pedagogy can be helpful in helping us to cross current youth work thresholds.

As a ‘conceptual gateway’ threshold concepts are identified as:

Transformational – bringing a shift in perspective

Integrative – exposing previously hidden connectivity

Irreversible – unlikely to be forgotten or unlearned

Troublesome – taking people out of their comfort zone, encountering the unknown

Liminal/Transitional – crossing from partial understanding to a new way of being can be unsettling

Adapted from Land et al (2010, p. ix –x)

We believe we are at that place. We are in a liminal state and at a tipping point and now I want to split us up into a bit of group work. As we know the ‘doom-and-gloom’ scenario is not without substance as cuts take effect. Yet, the creative possibilities that this tipping point and border pedagogy as a threshold concept...brings hope!

Interactive

So I want everyone to stand up or to stay seated and to start wiggling one finger, then all fingers, and your hand, then I want people to start wiggling their arms....

Now we have shook all the doom and gloom away and so next I want us to have a conversation on 'the youth work we want' which is an idea taken from the **work of Knight on the society we want** which found, when analyzing poverty, that '**Negative framing typically erodes the success of even the best- intentioned efforts at social change (Knight, 2015, p.12)**'. Therefore in a positive way I'd like us to explore, if agreeable with you a few of the **points on slide 7** -

1. Is the idea of tipping point useful to explore youth work in 2017? If so what does it look like for you?
2. If we are in a liminal state, what do you want to see on the other side of our portal?
3. What needs to happen to get there?

So....moving quickly now through slide 8...

Making sense of the world and creating new meanings by working on boundaries in order to deconstruct inflexible borders, takes us outside of current discourse to create new ideas or alternative forms of knowledge (Giroux, 2005).

And Slide 9

Consideration of the borders that are, or may be, crossed when such boundaries shift, affords opportunities for transformation of ideas and of professional praxis.

Of course...Our future challenges are vast but hopefully, not insurmountable....AND....

In this sense, we end on a note of optimism in the capabilities for people and practitioners to work together in order to achieve the kind of social change that is needed for improved equality and social justice in Community and Youth Work in ever changing contexts.

Then **Slide 10** is an unashamed promotion of our BOOK

Fundamentally we need to start where we are at and to see this as an opportunity to collectively regroup in creating a counter discourse to the deficit, pathologising narrative that has gained momentum in some political spheres, particularly towards young people. Collective action, awareness of context, holding those who need to be accountable, and striving for a better world post Brexit is essential. Undoubtedly sceptics will suggest that this will never happen and that the market economy is so deeply ingrained on a global scale that any vision for the future which is based on emancipatory social change is unlikely, particularly given that neo-liberal values seem to 'permeate everything about life on earth' (Ledwith, 2011, p. 1). However, this is where we need to adopt a 'redressable goal' approach and begin with the capacity to articulate our main purpose of youth and community work as taking action for social change.

Set within a narrative of transformational creativity, it may be possible to establish a new discourse as a counterbalance to the very real fears, exceptional conditions and inherent uncertainties that a series of public sector cuts have brought to an already hard-pressed workforce (many of whom give their time voluntarily). An alternative discourse is required, but at this stage, the conversation about Brexit has not collectively been established in youth work or community development.

Therefore, we believe that as a broad, yet value driven field, we need to clearly articulate our emancipatory purpose. Why we do what we do. Why we are proud to be professionally qualified youth work practitioners.

Just as the equality movement has developed over time, with perspectives on social justice changing and a social purpose for youth and community work being rearticulated from time to time, we understand that our analysis and assertions are not new or unique. However, for some time, as practitioners and in our forthcoming book (sorry blatant plug!) we have been concerned that many of us may be losing sight of our social egalitarian goals or, at the very least, we have stopped articulating practice in terms of emancipatory struggle for equality. This is not surprising given that neo-liberal capitalist society is arguably built on processes of domination and oppression. Nevertheless, it appears to have become routine

to discuss practice in terms of what and how we do things, rather than to articulate the eradication of inequality as our core purpose. Rather than become enmeshed in the trappings of short-term, quick-fix policies that pathologize the poor and distinguish between those who are deemed 'deserving' and those who are not.

The language of possibility and a belief in personal and collective power can gradually begin to move people forward on the continuum towards a more just society. It is our job as practitioners to be explicit in our striving for a more socially just world. To do this we need to be aware of the multiple levels of inequality and facilitate consciousness rising. As Giroux (2014) states,

Such change will not come unless the call for political and economic change is matched by a change in subjectivity, consciousness and the desire for a better world.

It is surely then the desire of everyone here to live in a better world and we truly believe that we can make that happen by ensuring we are working with those who are experiencing the hardest times in society and accurately reflecting their voices through the co-production of knowledge in order to strive for a more socially just society.

We believe there is an urgent need for a creative and forward facing dialogue between, and with, youth and community workers that responds to the current Brexit discussions. Rather than becoming consumed or driven by a reaction that is grounded in uncertainty and fear of the unknown, additional research and space for dialogue in this area could fill the void and ensure that the sector is adequately prepared for whatever Brexit discussions may bring.

Brexit will undoubtedly have an impact on our practice particularly if European funding is cut. However, as yet this is an unknown and at this uncertain time we can only make speculative or 'best guess' potentials. As yet, the negotiations are not finalized. The challenges of exiting the EU are unknown and untested. In responding to the concerns in

this talk, it could be useful to embrace this moment or 'tipping point', in order to consider how community and youth work might cross a threshold towards a new kind of practice.

Our future challenges are vast, but hopefully, not insurmountable. In this sense, we end on a note of optimism in the capabilities for people and practitioners to work together in order to achieve the kind of social change that is needed for improved equality and social justice in Youth and Community Work in a changing context.