



UWS Academic Portal

Borders, Brexit and community resilience – time for a re-think?

Coburn, Annette; Gormally, Sinead

Published: 05/07/2017

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Coburn, A., & Gormally, S. (2017). Borders, Brexit and community resilience – time for a re-think?. 5-5. Paper presented at The Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work 2017 Annual Conference, Hull, United Kingdom.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the UWS Academic Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact pure@uws.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Hull- Tag Paper

Seminar stream 3 - Freedom of Mind: Youth and Community Work as a process of liberating (informal) education

Title: Borders, Brexit and Community Resilience – time for a re-think?

Authors: Dr Annette Coburn and Dr Sinead Gormally

Today we're going to speak on three key areas-

1. Firstly, we're going to explore our context and Brexit. We're going to provide a brief overview of where we think we are at and the challenges which face us.
2. Secondly, we are going to argue that emancipatory practice should be our core purpose in striving for a more socially just and equitable society. We are going to explore our commonalities and how we can be a value driven practice which is research informed and can contribute to making our society, against all odds, a better place to be. How Community and youth work in being a boundary crossing pedagogy is a process of liberating education.
3. Thirdly, it considers psychological perspectives on how people can build strengths and improve their sense of well-being in order to help them prepare for the struggles they face in striving for equality and social justice. Drawing on ideas from positive psychology, the paper suggests that community resilience can help promote emancipatory practice.

Context and Brexit

How do we work in a space then that throughout the UK has undergone unprecedented cuts? In youth work for example, 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'.

Hughes et al (2015) after completing research here in Hull found that workers were at risk of burnout through the self-sacrifice they were giving to the field in an environment of limited resources. In a recent briefing for youthlink we found that youth work, and we would also argue

community development, are at a 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2000). The moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point (p.12).

Brexit then, 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 exit negotiations are not finalized. The challenges of exiting the EU are unknown and untested. In responding to the concerns in this briefing, 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.

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.

The 'doom-and-gloom' scenario is not without substance as cuts take effect. Yet, the creative possibilities that this tipping point brings, have yet to be considered fully.

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.

Boundary crossing pedagogy

The second thing we said we would discuss is that Emancipatory practice should be our core purpose in striving for a more socially just and equitable society and how Community and youth work as a boundary crossing pedagogy is a process of liberating education. 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 have studied these courses, why we research and why we are proud to be professionally qualified practitioners within community, learning and development.

In our forthcoming book (sorry blatant plug!) we argue that in order to engage in theoretically informed practice and in theorising practice as emancipatory praxis, practitioners need to have a critical understanding of both macro and micro levels of injustice and inequality to effectively work in redressing these.

In practice terms, Sen (2009) argues that the best place to start with social justice is with people's lives and to concentrate on 'redressable injustices'. These are injustices that can be addressed and achieved. They are the relatively small scale injustices that can still have an impact on the communities and groups in which we work.

Starting from a point where people can see 'quick wins' builds confidence and trust. It ensures that action is seen as productive and not futile. If we do not begin with redressable injustices, which have been identified by engaging with people who live and work in the communities we work in, this can result in feelings of failure, a lack of trust in the process and in feeling like the mountain is just too big to climb. That is why this meaningful engagement is so important.

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 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.

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 reading of practice research, 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.

As educators we are involved in the construction of socially contextualised knowledge as opposed to abstract, dare I say almost meaningless knowledge. We actively try and challenge and change the status quo. We are critical pedagogists. In adopting emancipatory praxis we use research and practice to challenge norms or oppression. We seek to challenge the inequalities present and critique our practice that can become compliant in neo-liberalism. We, as you know, start where people are at.

The aim of the critical educator is to work co-operatively and in partnership with people who are oppressed to question and challenge the status quo and the systems that sustain current power structures, and perpetuate privilege among those who are already powerful.

Community and youth work practitioners need to understand the ways in which those systems operate in order to make visible the social, cultural and political constructions of power that require to be challenged in order to facilitate social change.

Yet, it is not enough for practitioners to know and understand such things, as solely having awareness brings no impetus for change. It is only when action happens, in full partnership with the communities that we work alongside, that change happens. Indeed for change to be sustainable, the power balance in such partnerships must be overtly tipped towards people who are oppressed, rather than workers whose role it is to facilitate empowerment.

Martin (2007) highlights a need to challenge the status quo and 'to work against the grain of the neo-liberal common sense of our times' (p.11) and in doing so resist contemporary discourses that work against democracy and social justice.

To do so, we as practitioners and as researchers need to be conscious and aware of the negative discourse that is often perpetuated against the most vulnerable and marginalised in society. Therefore by becoming conscious, not only of the world and the way knowledge is produced, but of our own capacities to produce new knowledge, and to change the world, are core elements of critical pedagogy.

We also argue that community and youth work can be a border crossing pedagogy which brings capacity for collaboration between participants and developers of education as co-creators of new ideas by working through difference to create new knowledge. 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). Consideration of the borders that are, or may be, crossed when such boundaries shift, affords opportunities for transformation of ideas and of professional praxis.

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. Collective action, awareness of context, holding those who need to be accountable, and striving for a better world, means our future challenges are vast, but hopefully, not insurmountable. 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.

Community resilience

Rejection of a pathologising discourse requires practice to promote critical awareness of the deficit rhetoric which often seeps into the broader neo-liberal policy discourse. This discourse implies that people in society are lacking some crucial aspect to their being which makes it difficult for them to feel part of or to fit within the dominant social structures and contexts as ‘blame’ is placed on the individual, not the structure.

In practice, this means that we have to critically challenge this discourse and moreover not subscribe to superficial programmes of work which actually seek to further exclude, marginalise or isolate those with whom we work. We must consciously act, in order to challenge programmes which are specifically in place to change behaviour that socialises young people into pre-existing dominant structures of power (Cooper, 2011). We need to question the targeted interventionist, crime prevention agenda (Wallace and Coburn, 2003) that is often associated with practice that routinely categorises and criminalises young people as deviant (Barber, 2007; Morgan and O'Hare, 2001).

In striving for a more socially just society where people are valued as full citizens who experience a good quality of life, community practitioners need to move beyond analysis of individual capacities that are heavily linked to development of interventionist strategies that seek to 'fix' individual deficiencies or behaviour that is identified as problematic. Sen (1985) has suggested that quality of life is linked to an individual's capacity to function well, and should not be restricted by a limited set of functions that are within reach. Rather, quality of life is linked to the capability of each person to have 'the freedom to achieve well-being' (Sen, 1985, p. 200).

In positive psychology the role of positive emotions, such as joy, love, contentment and interest, are suggested as a vehicle for broadening and building creativity and establishing a repertoire of reserved coping strategies that can be drawn on when needed (Fredrickson, 2001). According to Fredrickson (2001), positive emotion builds psychological resilience so that individuals not only feel good about themselves at the present time, but also increases the chance of their feeling good in the future. Yet, beyond the level of individual well-being, a growing interest in the relationship between happiness and well-being, also suggests that happiness has been underestimated, in terms of its function in sustaining communities and significantly improving well-being (Layard, 2003). Thus, improved wellbeing or quality of life can impact on both individual and social contexts that, when usefully combined in youth and community work practices can develop optimal learning.

As community practitioners, it is helpful to engage in practices that focus on positive emotions and promote human flourishing rather than to focus on deficiencies that lead to people languishing in a context where social change becomes difficult. CYW offers potential

for an alternative discourse where people are valued as assets in communities that thrive, despite exceptional circumstances. In this sense the concept of resilience is useful in offering, ‘flexibility in response to changing situational demands, and the ability to bounce back from negative emotional experiences’ (Tugade et al., 2004, p. 1169).

The role of positive emotions contributes to conceptualisations of emancipatory practice, whereby the building of strengths and resilience can be developed as a means of enhancing collective capabilities for challenging oppressive structures—building community resilience, as distinct from individual resilience, integrates people, helping them to participate more fully in development of their communities.

However, resilience is routinely described as the individualised capacity to deal with problems, as distinct from facilitating consciousness to challenge their root cause. So, in addition to resistance as a sociological response to oppression, we believe it is important to consider how the development of resilience might offer a means of challenging inequality and injustice, as part of an emancipatory methodology.

In considering this methodology, it is important to critique the building of resilience within the context of empowering practice. Individual resilience is utilised by many professions as a means to understanding how some people ‘cope’ in certain circumstances whilst others do not. In contrast to this, youth and community work practice facilitate engagement of individuals in collective activity, to build capacities and skills in a number of contexts. Resilience then is not one dimensional but rather there are multiple contexts and multiple resiliencies apparent (Ungar, 2004).

Drawing on positive psychology, we assert the possibilities for a counter-narrative that is positive about communities and young people and is critical of discourses that routinely demonise, criminalise or stereotype. To create this counter-narrative we should avoid the kind of reductionist discourse that seeks to engage young people and adults in superficial ‘activity’ or ‘employability’ programmes as a filler of time, in order to change their behaviour, which is identified as risky, troublesome or antisocial. Starting where people are starting, we should seek to build on existing strengths and facilitate engagement in deeper learning. Taking a

resilient position, based on their knowledge of their own signature strengths, people can make choices about changes they want to achieve in their lives. Rather than being persuaded via short term, quick fix, interventions, a range of methods can be used to facilitate building resilience as part of open and longer term educational practices that offer time and space for people to identify and develop strengths and to form social relationships that enhance their prospects for making a good life (Sen, 1985).

We argue the need to start where we are at and to see this as an opportunity to collectively regroup in creating a counter discourse to the deficits, pathologising narrative that has gained momentum in some political spheres. Collective action, awareness of context, holding those who need to be as accountable, and striving for a better world, means 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 seeing Youth and Community Work as Emancipatory Practice.