

Co-operative Learning, Citizenship and Current Adult Learning Policies

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Introduction

I am delighted to be here at this important conference looking at the links between co-operative learning and citizenship. I have been asked to talk briefly about why this is so critical to current adult learning policies and why these are becoming more receptive to ideas of citizenship learning. And to consider how these fits with the Europe-wide ambition to promote lifelong learning and to create the structures, policies and initiatives that will achieve this. All of which resonates with the idea, raised earlier this evening, of creating bridges between policy and practice.

Definitions

The use of the term 'co-operative learning' in the conference title is interesting because we can interpret it in at least three ways, all of which are linked to mutually supportive approaches to education.

First, the term is infused with the history of a particular tradition of learning within the co-operative movement and indeed within the diverse movements amongst men and women since the eighteenth century who worked collectively to improve their working and living conditions, and to gain access to education.

Second, the term implies learning for co-operative action, or in other words to gain the skills, knowledge and understanding that will enable us to work with others for the good of our neighbours, our communities and broader society. This is learning that supports community activism, democratic participation, and the creation of social capital - to use Putnam's definition of the term, those social organisations, networks, norms and trust that facilitate co-operation for mutual benefit.

Third, co-operative learning suggests an approach to the learning process itself which emphasises the importance of learning with and from others; one that values peer learning or associative intelligence. This acknowledges the importance of learning from experience and of incorporating learners' experience into the curriculum and modes of delivery. Such an approach recognises mutual gains from learning and is a counterbalance to identifying

the value of learning solely in terms of individual achievement and progression.

In the UK this has implications for the work of the external inspectorate and the ways in which they apply the Common Inspection Framework and for the interpretation of achievement, particularly in the context of non-certificated learning, by the Learning and Skills Council. This is the body that now has responsibility for planning, funding and improving the quality of all post-16 learning up to higher education.

Activism and learning

All three interpretations reflect the founding principles of co-operative identity and in particular those that refer to education and training, co-operation among co-operatives and concern for community. They also emphasise the centrality of learners to the design and evaluation of their own learning. Whilst we applaud this principle, we must also recognise the demands it places upon adult educators in their approaches to community consultation and outreach, curriculum development, delivery, and the identification and recording of achievement. The latter includes the more informal, non-accredited learning which grows from community activism rather than specific qualifications.

In this context, where learning is galvanised by activism rather than the other way round, it is arguable that the identification of the benefits of learning, of the skills and knowledge gained, is crucial to transforming activity into a learning experience. The carnival float, the parent and toddler group, the submission to a planning enquiry, all have the potential to become learning outcomes as well as community achievements. In terms of widening participation, which is a crucial element of lifelong learning, this approach encourages vital 'first rung' provision that is accessible to more hesitant and sceptical learners.

Policy Background

Citizenship and learning for citizenship are high on the political agenda in Britain and Europe. This is in response to massive economic and social changes since 1945 including the reconfiguration of European politics, rising nationalism, ideas around global citizenship, regionalisation and alternative forms of mass political action.

There is a Europe wide recognition of the need to strengthen civil society and its engagement with European governance, particularly

in view of the failure of formal political processes to do this. The most recent UK general election showed a marked fall in voting, particularly amongst the young, and similar trends are evident in other European countries. This is accompanied by a decline in social trust; a recent UK Government discussion paper argued that this had approximately halved since the 1950s.

This is linked to the related issues of asylum, immigration and social inclusion and the question of how new citizens are to be assimilated in ways that strengthen social cohesion and combat prejudice and discrimination. Debates in this area also recognise the *effect* of prolonged, multi-generational poverty on host communities and the need for sustained strategies around community capacity building and neighbourhood renewal. The UK Government has prioritised the reinvigoration and rebuilding of our most deprived communities and citizenship, community activism and the principles of co-operation are fundamental to their thinking in this area.

In educational terms, there is an acknowledgement that full delivery of a wider culture of learning will not be achieved by legislation and public service alone. It must draw upon the vision and reach of voluntary and community organisations and enlightened employers; the kind of work so familiar to the co-operative movement.

Underpinning so much of this is a recognition of the fault line running between the knowledge/skills rich and knowledge/skills poor which is being deepened by unequal access to new technology. Research confirms that despite massive investment of public funds the underlying disparity remains stubbornly intact. Research also confirms that the divide applies as much to civil participation as it does to economic activity, highlighting a correlation between literacy and numeracy difficulties and low involvement in voluntary and community organisations, greater political disillusionment and sense of disempowerment, and low voter participation.

Embedding citizenship skills within a wider focus upon basic and key skills was amongst the recommendations of the UK National Advisory Group on Citizenship, whose proposals underpinned the development of "citizenship" as a new subject in the schools' National Curriculum. The Advisory Group articulated a relationship between pre-16 citizenship learning and the key skills identified as necessary for employment. For example, 'working with others' and 'communication' (both key skills) are fundamental to the aim and purpose of citizenship education. The same kind of mapping could be applied to an adult curriculum. Indeed, the second report of the Advisory Group recommended a form of citizenship entitlement for

16–19-year-olds, based heavily on activism and learning from experience - exactly the kind of work being carried out by the Co-operative College through the Rochdale Learning Partnership Citizenship project.

Other related work in the area of identifying and mapping relevant and core skills has been undertaken by the Government's Panel for Sustainable Development Education which proposed a model of "Lifeskills for a Sustainable Future", based on the lifeskills model developed for returning learners in the 1970s by Hopson and Scally.

Asylum and immigration

The UK Government's recent White Paper on Asylum and Immigration, and responses to it, have raised a range of specific issues such as the need for sufficient, appropriate and accessible English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL); language teaching for vocational purposes, for example for refugees from medical and teaching professions; and recognition of overseas qualifications. Debate has also centred on the broader questions of how citizenship education for new settlers will widen participation in learning, promote social inclusion and address race relations and racism.

This has implications for the ways this provision is linked to other mainstream learning opportunities and also to debates about poverty, social and economic regeneration, and isolation and alienation. It challenges us to stretch the curriculum to include seemingly non-educational community initiatives such as credit unions, furniture recycling projects and initiatives like the Co-operative College's Football Trust Training and Development project. The latter works with fans in soccer and rugby league football clubs to help them campaign and support their clubs and in some cases take over the running of them. This is wonderful stuff - capacity building, learner driven, really useful learning which is also building skills (communication, literacy, numeracy, organisational, personal, social) that are potentially transferable to work and other community contexts.

Democratic renewal

Returning to the first of my three earlier interpretations of the conference title, we should draw strength from recognising the long tradition of adult learning in the UK to which citizenship learning belongs. The tradition of socially purposeful learning that has

preserved the educational space for deliberate democracy. This is fundamental to the work of the WEA for example, which will be 100 years old next year, and of the Co-operative Movement. This includes the Movement's explicit training provision and also the educative dimension of its campaigning work, for example through the Women's Co-operative Guilds around maternity rights and child benefit. As David Blunkett, (then Minister for Education and Employment) argued in the Foreword to *The Learning Age*, the Green Paper which set out the UK Government's vision for lifelong learning,

We are fortunate in this country to have a great tradition of learning. We have inherited the legacy of the great self-help movements of the Victorian industrial communities.

This inheritance ranges through libraries, workers' institutes, trades unions, public lectures and evening classes. We must continue to argue for this honourable tradition, but we must also challenge our own skills, perspectives and knowledge in order to develop the citizenship skills that enable us to respond to the issues of our own time, and to the possibilities offered by the ICT and the broadcasting revolution.

We need to grow the kinds of learning that will support the articulation of alternative perspectives at all levels, from the most local to global, and which will support synergy between grass roots movements, single-issue campaigns and elective democracy. Recasting and redefining the body politic and its various constituencies is a major challenge for the new century.

Neighbourhood renewal

Learning for citizenship is also central to the delivery of the UK Government's huge agenda around neighbourhood renewal. This is a 20-year strategy to address the multiple causes of concentrations of deprivation and disadvantage in 88 identified areas where unemployment is highest, public services least effective and where 70 per cent of our black and minority ethnic communities live. This is one of the reasons why it is important to link responses to immigration with strategies for combating poverty and isolation.

Active citizenship and the language and aspiration of community empowerment inform the thinking behind the Government's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and the vision behind its implementation. Developing the skills and knowledge needed to deliver this is high on the Government's agenda - their strategy for achieving this is to be published in the Autumn. We know it will assign key roles for voluntary and community sector organisations

and enlightened employers. There is much that could be learned here from the Co-operative Movement.

Conclusion

I would like to end with two quotations. The first is from Romano Prodi, who argues for a European dimension of learning for citizenship to underpin the creation of a 'Network Europe' to strengthen civil society across national boundaries and frontiers - as he says:

Networks bring people together, allowing them to discover who shares their views ... and who disagrees ...

This vision is an important means of cutting across fixed notions of national identity and different classes of citizen.

The second quotation takes us back to David Blunkett's Foreword to The Learning Age in which he locates learning for citizenship within the wider context of lifelong learning, arguing eloquently that:

As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. This is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings.

As I began by saying, this is an immensely important subject, central to our thinking in a range of major policy areas. I wish you well with your discussions and debates.

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