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Community development
as a learning process

Insights from the UK

Alison Gilchrist

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Abstract

The article explores the relationship between community development and informal adult education. It examines the different models that are recently or currently practised in the UK and considers the community worker's role in facilitating shared learning through experience-focused reflection and discussion. Community development uses educational processes to support collective models of social change and development through building skills and confidence, increasing understanding of political inequalities and promoting a broad approach to empowerment.

02

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Introduction

Community development is fundamentally concerned with learning and change, both on an individual level, and in order to develop collective capacity (see Gilchrist/Taylor 2011). It therefore has vital links with community education, whether this takes place in formal classes or informally through reflection on experience. Community development workers play an important role as educators in the sense that they help community members to learn through their experiences. This does not mean they are in a "teaching" or "training" role; rather that they encourage or facilitate informal discussions relating to activities in which people share their feelings, exchange useful knowledge and revise their opinions.

In the United Kingdom (UK) there has been a strong tradition of working with young people and adults in community settings. Often, this has taken a radical perspective (see Ledwith 2006; Ledwith/Springett 2010), emphasising opportunities for people to learn to question their situation by means of debate and Freirean forms of dialogue. This approach aims to encourage community members to develop different understandings of the world

and to challenge the various forms of oppression, exploitation and discrimination that they encounter in the course of everyday lives. This has been termed "consciousness-raising" or "conscientisation" and takes an explicitly left-leaning political stance.

At the other end of the political spectrum, community development has been characterised as working to maintain the status quo; to foster active citizenship and community self-help so that society is able to run smoothly and without challenging the capitalist economic system. In this model, the purpose of community development is generally to address deficiencies within communities, for example regarding leadership skills or democratic processes. Capacity-building measures adopted in this model of community development include supporting individuals to develop skills and confidence in governance, and offering workshops on governance roles such as community engagement, partnership and volunteer or committee roles. The usual critique of this capacity-building approach generally refers to its "deficit" analysis of communities, based on an assumption that disadvantaged communities lack the necessary skills, knowledge and infrastructure to effectively participate in mainstream society as active citizens (see Mayo/Annette 2010; Packham

2008). This is seen as both insulting and misguided as it underestimates the talent and traditions of collective organisation which these communities have often demonstrated, particularly when faced with external threats or crises.

Empowerment for social change

Locally organised collective action includes many different strands, each of which draws on different life histories, cultures and social issues. Together they can be seen as creating a strong, vibrant force within society, through which ordinary people are able to improve the quality of their lives, tackle problems and challenge unfair situations. Community workers contribute to this movement through interventions by paid professionals and experienced volunteers or activists.

Community development is about empowerment, as well as education. It emphasises the value of people participating in decisions, especially those that directly affect their personal lives and living conditions. Informal education has a vital part to play in increasing access to information and enabling people to access and communicate new ideas. The sharing of skills, knowledge and responsibility between community members and other stakeholders enhances individual and collective capacities to make and implement real choices and to challenge power dynamics that consistently disadvantage some communities. Sometimes this process requires facilitation by professional youth and community development workers, but can also be encouraged within groups through peer education and reflective practice.

Developing leadership capacity

Organising people is a complicated process and yet, for some, seems to come intuitively. We talk about charismatic leaders and "natural" organisers. These people seem able to analyse a problem, suggest a realistic strategy and muster the resources needed to implement the plan. They are able to respond creatively to situations and to build good working relationships, even in the face of disagreements and conflicts of interest. Is it possible to learn these

qualities and abilities? Can they be transferred through experiential learning and community education to those who are interested in being more active in their communities and possibly taking on leadership roles?

Community development recognises that people are not born with leadership characteristics or skills: rather, these are acquired over the years through a whole variety of experiences and observations. Helping people to reflect on their own experiences encourages them to realise how they can contribute to a collective endeavour and learn from each other. This is an important aspect of community development and informal education, which is often practised with young people. The result of such interventions can be a more conscious and participatory approach to the task of organising people. It may require an explicit definition of what will be achieved and more deliberate processes of creating opportunities for learning and reflection. Improving the confidence and understanding of all those involved, including the community or youth workers, ensures that community leadership becomes more effective because it is able to take into account a range of factors.

Experiential learning

People working with communities are often very practical. They want to get out there and make things happen rather than spend too much time thinking and discussing. We all make use of theories, however unconsciously, and everyone can benefit from paying critical attention to ideas and emotions in order to develop reflective practice. Theory should not be something intimidating. Everyone develops and uses theories – they help us go about our lives without making too many mistakes! Developing a habit of asking simple questions such as "why?", "who?", "when?", "what?", "where?" and "how?" means that we regularly spend time clarifying (and possibly sharing) the perceptions and motivations that form the basis of our actions. This is usually a good thing, as it helps us to operate more effectively and learn from what is going on around us. In particular, analysing why something went wrong or turned out differently from what one expected is a vital (and sometimes) painful part of the learning

process. Colleagues and fellow activists can support this, so having a good supervisor, mentor or trusted friend is a real bonus!

Theory informs the way we work as practitioners, volunteers or activists, allowing us to be more thoughtful about what we do and how we interpret what is happening locally and in the wider world. Theories evolve through experience and experimentation. They offer ways of transferring the learning from one situation to another, providing models for shared learning and evaluation. Most of our theories are very personal. They provide guidelines to help us live our lives and perform our jobs effectively. If the ideas don't work, then they can be discarded or adapted until they "fit" better with our actual experiences. Theory is a dynamic tool – acting as the framework for planning, carrying out and evaluating our actions. Through encouraging the adoption of this approach as a "normal" part of community education, community development should become more open and more accountable, due to being more readily explained and understood by the participants. This approach should also make specific projects more likely to succeed, as potential difficulties will be anticipated and avoided wherever possible. Theory is developing all the time, often in our unconscious thought processes, but can also be facilitated using community education techniques.

Encouraging reflection

Reflective practice has an advantage over the purely intuitive approach because it encourages discussion, allowing people to be a part of decision-making, and enables everyone to contribute and learn from their own experience and that of others. Reflective practice is not easy. It requires the conscious and continuous analysis of activities, decisions and outcomes. It opens up possibilities for action and involvement on the part of community members and other stakeholders at the planning stage, and ensures that any evaluation that takes place along the way is a fair assessment of what was achieved rather than what was aspired to. At the individual level, reflective practice is empowering. As a collective process, it is about sharing perspectives, finding explanations and moving forward together.

It is also a way of consolidating relationships in the group to build trust and mutual respect, particularly if based on honest discussions and the process of working through differences of opinion.

To facilitate these reflection processes, it is helpful to take advantage of the thoughts and ideas of others. Training workshops and adult education classes are platforms for sharing ideas and experiences. Books, articles and on-line forums open up other routes to knowledge. Even if you don't agree with everything you read or hear, simply trying to understand why you think differently can be an exciting way of developing your own theories. Sometimes you come across a single concept or even a question which can change the whole way you think about something you have encountered or experienced. It is important to remember that many of the ideas that get "written up" as formal theory are the result of the same processes of experience, discussion and reflection which thread through our daily lives.

Learning as consciousness-raising

Community education methods using dialogue, reflection and conscientisation are vital ways of "raising consciousness", for example concerning exploitation or discrimination. Through talking with others in similar situations, people often become aware that they are not alone in their sense of powerlessness or injustice. They may have blamed themselves for being "inadequate", "deviant" or "ignorant", having internalised the propaganda and prejudices of others. However, through discussion they realise that there are other explanations for the problems they are having with their children, their accommodation, their health or whatever – problems that are to do with the way society is structured.

People may develop a greater awareness of themselves – the role they play in their family and friendship networks, as well as their position in the wider society. Sharing experiences with others leads to an understanding that there are powerful forces operating in our lives. These generate assumptions and discourses which distort how we see ourselves, though often carrying the authority of tradition, culture or even "science". They are

therefore usually seen as legitimate or "common sense" justifications of how people behave towards one another and how society is organised. However, these hegemonic explanations may well result in feelings of oppression, which perpetuate social inequalities and injustice – for example, relating to racism, homophobia and the exclusion of disabled people. Understanding that these dimensions of our social identity can critically determine our opportunities in life (and the choices we make) is a crucial source of learning. The technique of "critical dialogue" involves constantly questioning situations and explanations. Originally developed by Freire (see Freire 1972) as a form of political pedagogy, it is still a valuable aid to learning and collective mobilisation. The acknowledgement of a common problem that can be solved by banding together with others is the first step on the road to solidarity and collective action. Similarly, hearing the other side of an argument can lead to significant and constructive shifts in attitude.

Learning for collective action

Learning takes place at many different levels and from a variety of sources. People involved in campaigning, or in developing and running organisations, acquire a range of practical skills. They may learn how to chair a meeting, take minutes, prepare a budget or write a newsletter. They might undertake community-led research involving the process of deciding on a research question, designing a survey and analysing the results. They may re-discover abilities forgotten since their school days or they may be learning completely new skills, such as how to do an internet search or design a website using the latest computer programmes. As well as increasing their individual capacities, the motivation for many members of community groups or volunteers is the desire to get things done and to participate in decision-making.

In addition to reflection and discussion, learning takes place through listening, watching and doing. Education through community action can involve observation, role-play, and practising and receiving constructive feedback. People are learning because they want to contribute to the common goal, sharing the responsibility for achieving change or perhaps

just keeping something going. Networking, or using relationships and connections, is a common, though often hidden, way of accessing skills and support provided by other community members or helpful agencies (see Gilchrist 2009).

Research as a form of learning

At another level, theory is developed through a more systematic approach to asking questions, obtaining evidence, building a hypothesis or model to explain what or why something is happening, and then testing this through further observation, and perhaps even experimentation. This is the process of research, but it is not just something that is undertaken by academics, scientists or journalists. Community-led action research enables community members to decide what will be the focuses of their investigation – the questions they want answers to – and to then learn the methods for gathering, analysing and presenting evidence so that action can be taken to address the problems they have identified. In some developing countries this approach is known as "participatory appraisal" and is used to reveal local issues and potential solutions (see Chambers 1983). Service users and volunteers can help an agency to evaluate its practice, to compare alternative approaches or to try out improvements, perhaps through a pilot scheme testing out a new policy or method of intervention.

There is an element of research that we all use in managing new challenges in the course of our everyday lives, especially when it comes to dealing with uncertainty or the unexpected. Research can also be more private, relating to personal interests, for example relating to local traditions or one's own family history. However, activists often become experts in a problem facing the whole community. This could mean carrying out research on local government budget setting procedures or on a technical subject relating to the environment or the legal rights of tenants and migrant workers. This learning might be picked up through observation and discussion or it might come from reading and attendance at a more formal training course. Either way, such knowledge becomes a vital resource both for the individual and for the collective body.

Current UK context

Since the change of government in 2010, there has been a drastic reduction in public funding available for community development and community education work. Many jobs have been lost and communities all over the country are not receiving the support they need, especially in the most disadvantaged areas. Instead, the state is cutting back on many aspects of government provision and expecting volunteers to take on responsibilities for running community facilities, youth work and even delivering social care and leisure services. Several of the national community development organisations are under threat of closure, and local authorities are cutting support for adult and community education. After a period under the New Labour government, which put great emphasis on involving and empowering communities in public decision-making (and invested a lot of money into various engagement programmes and toolkits), this rapid decline in the fortunes of community development has come as a shock. Just when disadvantage and inequalities are growing fast (see Dorling 2011), communities are being denied access to advice, resources and professional interventions that could help them to organise and to challenge social injustice.

The future is uncertain and gloomy. Prime Minister Cameron's rhetoric about the "Big Society" has disappeared from political debate and there are few well-funded government programmes that offer meaningful support to disadvantaged communities. On a more optimistic note, however, the community development movement is managing to keep its core values alive and these are still having some influence in related fields such as community education, public health, neighbourhood policing and planning (see Chanan/Miller 2013). Other professionals have something to learn about working with communities in ways that respect their life-earned knowledge, encourage new insights and promote changes in attitudes and behaviour. This includes peer and experiential learning in informal settings, as well as formal training. It is vital that space and opportunities are protected for both these approaches, and that the skills and strategies of community development remain available at all levels, including universities and adult education settings, for guidance and inspiration.

Conclusions

The community development worker can, as an educator, facilitate all these processes – through enabling members of a group to learn from one another, introducing skills and knowledge from outside or through supporting individuals in their own reflection and growth. Learning is not always a smooth or positive process. Uncomfortable ideas that challenge one's intuitive thinking or assumed knowledge (i.e. prejudices) are frequently resisted or denied. It is often easier for someone to accept their current position by rationalising it rather than seeking to challenge the situation. This is sometimes referred to as "internalised oppression". In this case, the community educator's task is to help people to see themselves in a wider context and to encourage them to feel that they can change the things that they are not happy with or which make them angry. The first step to overcoming feelings of helplessness may be the realisation that the problem is neither your fault nor your sole responsibility. This is empowering in itself and can become an even more powerful tool when linked with others who share the same understanding and desire for change.

For many people life takes place in a complex and changing environment in which they feel they have only limited control or influence. Learning from lived and shared experiences enables people to develop strategies for managing these uncertainties and for challenging some of the underlying power differentials. Reflective practice and informal education are core processes within community development, as a self-supporting activity and as a professional intervention. Both require a degree of honesty, trust and respect amongst all those involved. They need an investment of time, patience and a willingness to take risks in exploring difficult issues or power dynamics.
The rewards are great: better analysis of situations, clarity of purpose, stronger commitment to a common goal, mutual understanding, improved accountability and an openness to learning. In this sense, the work of community development practitioners and community educators should be complementary. This is perhaps a major opportunity for everyone who sees themselves as contributing towards this complicated business of challenging and changing social conditions, but well worth the effort!

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Alison Gilchrist, Ph.D.

Foto: K.K.

Alison@alisongilchrist.co.uk
http://www.alisongilchrist.co.uk
+44 (0)1539 725195

Alison Gilchrist worked for many years as a community development worker in inner-city neighbourhoods and has been active in various local and national networks. She lectured in community and youth work at the University of the West of England for several years and then worked for the Community Development Foundation (CDF) between 1999 and 2009, responsible for CDF's work with regional levels of government and for practice development. In April 2009 Gilchrist embarked on a freelance career as an independent consultant offering skills in research, training, group facilitation, organisation development and policy advice. She is now based in the Lake District but undertakes work throughout Britain and Europe. She combines work as a practitioner, researcher, writer and trainer and has particular areas of expertise in community development theory, empowerment, equalities practice, social inclusion and networking.

Community Development als Lernprozess

Einblicke aus dem Vereinigten Königreich

Kurzzusammenfassung

Der Beitrag untersucht das Verhältnis zwischen Community Development und informeller Erwachsenenbildung sowie die unterschiedlichen Modelle, die in letzter Zeit oder gegenwärtig im Vereinigten Königreich praktiziert wurden und werden. Weiters beschäftigt er sich mit der Rolle der SozialarbeiterInnen bei der Erleichterung des gemeinsamen Lernens durch erfahrungsorientierte Reflexion und Diskussion. Community Development verwendet Bildungsprozesse, um kollektive Modelle des sozialen Wandels und der sozialen Entwicklung auf folgende Weise zu unterstützen: durch den Aufbau von Fertigkeiten und Selbstvertrauen, durch ein gesteigertes Verständnis für politische Ungleichheiten sowie durch die Förderung eines umfassenden Empowerment-Ansatzes.

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