



The importance of reflection in experiential learning with community and youth workers for the learning age

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The New Labour government, in its Green Paper on the Learning Age, published in February 1998, put lifelong learning at the heart of its programme. In this article we aim to demonstrate that there is a direct parallel between the processes outlined in the Green Paper and the processes of experiential learning and community development by focusing on the Diploma in Community and Youth Work Studies run by the Community Work Unit (CWU) based in the Centre for the Development of Continuing Education at the University of Manchester.

Community action provides a setting for informal education. Community workers are in a unique position in relation to developing the potential for learning in the groups and individuals with whom they work. Their education and training should enable them to articulate and value their experience and reflect upon it in order to establish a meaningful basis for further self- and/or community development. We will explore how the CWU uses participative learning methods which recognize, value and use the experience and understanding of the participants as a basis for their own and others' learning, and the relevance of these learning methods to the work practice of the participants.

Introduction

Individuals bring past experiences and beliefs, as well as their cultural histories and world views, into the process of learning; all of these influence how we interact with and interpret our encounters with new ideas and events. As our personal perspectives are mediated with the world, we construct and attribute meaning to these encounters, building new knowledge in the process. This constructive, interpretative work is facilitated and deepened when it is undertaken with others and with reflection. (Lambert 1995: xi)

In recent years the notion of the 'learning society' has come under challenge due to economic, social and cultural changes. A greater emphasis has been placed on the

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economic relevance of learning as constructed as a condition for economic competitiveness. Furthermore, a greater emphasis has been placed on the learner to secure his/her 'lifelong learning' in a marketplace of opportunities in which individualism in the learning market is based on and inscribes self-interest. A conception of lifelong learning supporting the infrastructure of society has been displaced by one in which self-reliance and competitiveness are the goals.

The New Labour government, in its Green Paper on the Learning Age published in February 1998, put lifelong learning at the heart of its programme. The learning age itself is defined as the creation of 'a culture of self-improvement for the many and not the few'. It is to include new forms of delivering learning, better advice, information and support for learners, learning in the workplace, involvement of further higher and adult education, high standards and a better qualification system.

It is our contention that there is a direct parallel between the processes outlined in the Green Paper and the processes of experiential learning and community development. In this paper we will examine this by focusing on the Diploma in Community and Youth Work Studies run by the Community Work Unit (CWU) based in the Centre for the Development of Continuing Education at the University of Manchester.

Community workers are in a unique position in relation to developing the potential for learning in the groups and individuals they work with. The community development process and the CWU's curricular and teaching approaches and methods both recognize and value experience as a basis for further learning and development. Reflection is crucial and central to both processes in order to:

- make experience significant;
- to identify strengths and development of learning needs; and
- establish a meaningful basis for further self and/or community development.

Through the medium of a qualitative analysis and evaluation of the Manchester Diploma programme, we hope to demonstrate that within the context of lifelong learning:

- community action is itself a setting for informal education;
- in order to use experience as a basis for learning, that experience must be articulated and valued, and that reflection is essential to the process of learning from experience.

Van der Zee (1991) argues that three strategic issues are needed to broaden the definition of learning (education as a dimension of society); the need to redirect the goal of learning (growth towards completeness); the need to foster autonomy in learning (self-education); and the need to stress a political approach to learning (the right to learn). This pre-supposes new approaches in the delivery of teaching and learning. The pedagogical assumption on which present-day curricula are based, are increasingly coming under attack. Some scholars seek the solution primarily in a new approach to training and education. Two different points of emphasis are discernible within this approach. In the one case, the introduction of a new or revised educational concept is stressed (self-directed learning, problem-orientated instruction, learning from experience, andragogy). In the other case, the emphasis lies on the methods that should be used in the design of instruction and for solving performance problems (instructional design, educational technology, course planning). Besides the educational system proper, numerous other agencies are also involved, the mass media, the unions, industry

and commerce, the health services, travel organizations, public information outlets, prisons and so on. He believes that a comprehensive strategy aimed at opening up new opportunities for people to learn should consist of the following steps. First it is necessary to chart the existing forms of learning. Then we should examine how the potential of the suggested types of learning can be further developed.

Over the last ten years, many universities and colleges have begun to transform their learning programmes in this manner, introducing greater personal choice and flexibility through modular structures, accrediting a variety of learning achieved in the workplace or community, and combining this with new learning technologies. The emphasis has been upon the development of personal resourcefulness and enterprise with a more purposeful focus on the labour market. Many more students will enter the labour market with credentials which reflect in some measure the emphasis now being placed on individual choice, self-reliance and personal proficiency. This is reflected in the CWU's approach to experiential learning and group-work.

The learning age: a qualitative analysis and evaluation

A qualitative paradigm was considered to be the most appropriate for our study. This methodological approach encourages interpretative human skills and is concerned with description and interpretation rather than with measurement and prediction. Another source of concern was that the original voices of the Diploma participants should reflect the social context in which their educational practices occurred. The work reported here respects the original voices of the community and youth workers and lets them speak for themselves, using the rich density of meaning of the direct quotation, thus bringing into communal hearing voices that are often ignored or have become silent in the micropolitical realities of working life.

Community workers can be said to be involved in facilitating learning and development in the groups and individuals with whom they work. Community action thus provides a setting where informal education can take place:

Put at its simplest, practically every community action initiative – from parents pressing for day-care facilities or a safe street crossing, to villagers attempting to build an irrigation system, to tenants' groups presenting schemes for rent reform, to demonstrations against local industry's intentions to build a car park on public play space, to campaigns for a nuclear freeze – exhibits a strong educative dimension in that the adults involved are engaged in a continuous process of developing skills, acquiring knowledge, and reflecting on their experiences, mostly in collaboration with other adults. (Brookfield 1986: 159)

A recent example of this is taken from a visit Mary made in November 1996 to Community House Action Team, a community group in Dallam, Warrington. She was visiting as an assessor for the Diploma programme to look at an in-depth analysis of the group, which had been prepared by a group member as part of an assessment. While proud of their achievement as a group, individual members were very conscious that they, as individuals, had learned a great deal about running a community organization, about local and national politics and about a range of issues which affected them and their community. They saw this learning not just as useful in its outcomes, but were also conscious that because of what they had learned, they were therefore capable of learning and could learn other things in other settings. They saw themselves as being able to

move on to other things; community work, politics, teaching or art. The key words in their discussion were 'confidence', 'achievement' and 'sense of worth'.

While this learning had taken place informally, it had been facilitated by the support of a more experienced community activist and community worker. Both had valued the experience already held by members of the group and had supported and encouraged the identification and development of group members' skills. This confirmed our conceptualization of lifelong learning as outlined in the introduction to this article as the emphasis given to a process which leads to individual development over the learning lifetime. It is the broader concept which includes lifelong education:

Recent writing on the idea of the learning society points towards a more holistic view of education, which acknowledges learning in all its form and venues and which values the many and varied ways in which people learn. The nature of this rapidly changing society demands that individuals and communities take up this challenge so that they can take their part in shaping the future. (Moreland and Lovett 1997: 201)

Informal learning is an important part of a process of development for the individual, his/her community and the wider society and complements the opportunities offered by formal and non-formal education:

Implicit in many writings on lifelong learning is the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning as equally valuable aspects of the overall lifelong learning process. (*ibid.* 203)

Similarly youth work is recognized as a form of social education, with most local authorities housing their youth services within education departments. Youth workers plan and implement a 'youth work' curriculum which seeks to value young people and acknowledges their right of access to information and support which will enable them to make more informed choices about their own lives. The importance of recognizing and valuing the experience of adult learners is central to experiential learning, andragogy and the humanistic educators:

Because an adult defines (himself) largely by (his) experience (he) has a deep investment in its value. And so when (he) finds (himself) in a situation in which (his) experience is not being used, or its worth is minimized, it is not just (his) experience that is being rejected – (he) feel rejected as a person. (Knowles 1996: 89)

It is also a dynamic and effective method of facilitating learning in formal settings:

Although we spend most of our time learning from experiences, this aspect of learning is greatly neglected in comparison with that which takes place in the formal classroom. (Boud *et al.* 1993: 2)

Edwards (1995) suggests that without critical input there is a danger of producing a learning society which, while providing greater opportunities for adults to learn, continues to reproduce inequality. One of the key features of the CWU's approach to learning is the use of participative learning methods which recognize, value and use the experience and understanding of the participants as a basis for their own and others' learning (CWU 1996). Higher education is still largely the preserve of white, young people from higher income families (Taylor 1992, Hughes and Tight 1995, Baxter *et al.* 1996). Current government plans to introduce tuition fees seem unlikely to change this situation. One of the most important features of the Diploma programme is the recruitment of 'non-traditional' students: that is community and youth workers who

are mature women, black people, disabled people and working-class people without previous experience of tertiary education (CWU 1996: 1). The background and experience of participants is mirrored in the way in which the CWU is staffed. Tutors, member of the group of (external) assessors, programme committee members and field-work supervisors are experienced field-workers, managers and trainers who are representative of diverse cultures, backgrounds and experience. This range of perspectives ensures that the relevance and importance of applicants' and participants' experience and background are recognized, understood and valued. Participants also have the opportunity to understand how their backgrounds and experiences have influenced their perspective:

Through the exposure to new ideas, information and networks, challenges, discoveries, positive reinforcement, and criticism and self and others, participants question previously held beliefs... participants learn:

- that their own experience is different from others;
- to question their approach to certain situations;
- to extend their links and networks to incorporate new sources of information and support;
- to think about their previously held convictions regarding people with other experiences, from different backgrounds and perspectives. (Community Work Unit 1996: 12)

Experience is not merely made up of events in people's lives that can be pointed to as distinct from other events. Our race, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability etc. are all part of our experience and those parts which perhaps most of all will have influenced our approach and attitude to ourselves and others; as Usher (1993: 170) puts it: 'Thus I understand my experience through the pre-understandings (prejudices) which situate me, which make me the kind of person who projects the kind of meanings I do'.

Or as Weil and McGill (1989: xiv) put it:

In our view one of the strengths of experiential learning in practice is the meaning that we give our actions and therefore our thinking. They are not separate entities. Meaning is not 'out there'; we are part of that meaning and we can therefore convey it personally.

While there is widespread use of experiential learning methods in the education and training of community and youth workers, the use of these methods does not in itself demonstrate a commitment to valuing and using the experience of participants:

Courses sometimes have active experiences built in but then operate in a knowledge centred way which shows that they do not really value this experience (...) Students quickly recognize that their experience is not taken seriously and stop paying attention to it. (Gibbs 1988: 117)

A commitment to experiential learning must go further than the use of certain 'methods' or 'exercises' in the classroom. It should place the participant at the centre of the learning process, rather than the 'teacher' or the 'subject' and therefore present a challenge to the teacher or facilitator:

For the teacher, adopting new methods may mean changing old assumptions and former attitudes, and developing strategies that are different from the familiar, comfortable ones to which (he) is accustomed. (Brandes and Ginnis 1986: 19)

In order to value experience, it must be seen to be used as the basis for further learning. Therefore when using the experience of the learning group, the facilitator must be sure that there is sufficient appropriate experience within it. Applicants to the Diploma programme must have had a least three years' experience of working in community and youth work or a related field and must demonstrate an adequate range and depth of experience. The selection process includes discussion among tutors and assessors of the make up of the learning group in terms of representation of experience and perspective that should inform the content of the sessions.

As an assessor, Mary has been involved in a number of interviews (oral examinations) to assess readiness for entry to level 2 of the programme. All participants are asked what they think they have learned from level 1 of the programme. All identify the sharing of experience in the group as both a source of new learning and an incentive to re-examine their own practice. Of course this is not what they actually said! It was generally expressed like this:

I really learned a lot from the other participants. I wasn't sure whether how I did things was right or not, but what we talked about in the discussions made me realize why certain things had worked and others didn't. I also learned that there is more than one way of doing things and there isn't just one approach which is right and works for everything

In facilitating learning with workers who have less experience in the field, experiential methods can be used to explore assumptions and attitudes and to encourage reflection on on-going work practice. However it may be necessary to make far more of an input into the group of examples of a range of good practice, especially anti-oppressive practice. Other more experienced workers, or workers who are involved in particularly challenging projects can be brought in to co-tutor and introduce their experience into the group and facilitate exercises to promote analysis of those methods and approaches. For example, Mary has recently tutored on a basic training programme for part-time youth workers and involved Diploma participants in co-tutoring on a number of sessions. This was a way of valuing the experience and skills of the Diploma participants, giving them an opportunity to (further) develop their skills as facilitators and it provided appropriate facilitators when examining particular issues on the basic training programme. The example of the community group in Dallam demonstrated that the experience of having one's skills, knowledge and experience valued and of building on those skills to develop new ones was not only a powerful learning experience for the group, but contributed to their feelings of confidence and self-worth. This is also the case with participants on the Diploma programme. Their learning outcomes are not solely about skills and knowledge and their application, but about recognizing and valuing them themselves and increasing their sense of confidence and self-worth, the very thing most of them will be striving to do with the groups and individuals with whom they work.

Kolb (1984) says of the influence of Dewey's ideas: 'the challenges this approaches were designed to meet, those of coping with change and lifelong learning, have increased even more dramatically'. The challenge of community and youth work is to continue to support communities, including young people, in meeting their needs in a changing society. Community workers therefore need to be able to respond to new and changing circumstances, and with the effects of those circumstances on individuals, groups and communities. A programme for experienced and currently active practitioners cannot rely solely on teaching (even if experiential methods are used) theory and practice tried

and tested elsewhere and elsewhen, which may have relevant elements, but which were developed in response to a different set of circumstances:

‘Reflective practice’ entails the view that the use of knowledge must be context specific... Because all client situations are unique, it cannot be assumed that past knowledge and information found appropriate in a previous client situation will be equally, or at all, appropriate in a current client situation in the form in which it was initially used. (Bright 1996: 172)

In the CWU learning group there exists a range of experience in workers who right now are trying to tackle current problems. What they need is the opportunity to begin firstly to understand the basis for their own practice and evaluate it, to recognize the diversity of experience and views of others and their ability to reflect on their practice in such a way as to be able to recognize their strengths and development needs in work situations and to build and use the support networks available to them. They are not going to be able to do this without the ability to critically reflect on their experiences and the confidence to express their knowledge of the communities they work with to their managers and employers, who have other demands on their allegiances. The learning group gives a range of experience and viewpoints which are the source of further learning and reflection:

Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created throughout the transformation of experience. (Kolb 1984: 38)

Although experience is the basis for learning, experience cannot be assumed to be an indication that learning has occurred. While one of the propositions about learning from experience is: ‘Experience is the foundation of, and the stimulus for learning’ (Boud *et al.* 1993: 8) and experience cannot be bypassed, reflection on that experience is also essential for learning to take place:

Reflection consists of those processes in which learners engage to recapture, notice and re-evaluate their experience to turn it into learning. (Boud *et al.* 1985: 36)

Critical reflection is essential for the community and youth workers who will inevitably be working with members of oppressed and marginalized groups and will probably be a member of at least one such group themselves. Community workers need to be aware of their own pre-conceived notions and be able to effectively challenge them in others. They also need to be able to understand the political contexts of the work they are engaged in. Reflection for them must be a tool for effective practice: ‘Some benefits of reflection may be lost if they are not linked to action’ (Boud *et al.* 1985):

Because the professional is the receptacle of information concerning a given situation, the reflective process is essentially about increasing the professional’s awareness of factors which influence the planning of her action. It is only by becoming aware of this information, and its quality and role in the design of her action, that the professional will realize alternative, and possibly better, ways of interpreting, interacting and dealing with problematic client situations. (Bright 1996: 169)

As learning from experience is not limited to the classroom, nor should reflection be. Reflection is meaningless if it does not lead to greater understanding, or changes in understanding or attitude:

Learning to think critically is one of the most significant activities of adult life. When we become critical thinkers we develop an awareness of the assumptions under which we, and others, think and act. We learn to pay attention to the context in which our actions and ideas are generated. We become sceptical of quick fix solutions, of single answers to problems, and of claims to universal truths. We also become open to alternative ways of looking at, and behaving in, the world. The ability to think critically is important in our lives in many different ways. (Brookfield 1987: ix)

Boud *et al.* (1985) identify three elements important to the reflective process; returning to the experience, attending to feelings and re-evaluating the experience. These are mirrored in the wide range of learning methods and opportunities which promote reflection used on the Diploma programme. The modular structure itself offers participants the opportunity to choose optional modules which enable them to meet learning or practice development needs. Opportunities for reflection are offered through:

- focus of individual modules;
- study groups;
- evaluation of modules;
- range of experience and perspectives in the learning group;
- regular work-place supervision;
- individual tutorials and tutorial groups;
- lunch-time workshops;
- detailed assessment feedback;
- keeping detailed recordings;
- keeping organized records of learning.

As well as the wealth of their own and others' experience, participants need to reflect on the learning process and methods and their interaction with other group members. The best time, place and method of reflection will depend on the participant and their circumstances. One participant of a module Mary ran recently said that: 'most of my reflection was done when I got home and was able to write up my notes'. The same participant also said that talking to other participants outside the session was important to her and she hoped others did the same because: 'it's about enhancing your learning.' One of the aims of this module was to make a clear link between community work and adult learning. Interestingly, one of the participants commented during one of the sessions that: 'I knew that there was link between community work and adult learning and just accepted it, but I am only now beginning to understand what it is.' It is important for the facilitator to recognize that participants may need to revisit what has happened in a previous session. On the same module, time was allotted at the beginning of each session to any issues or problems arising from the previous one. Participants were able to discuss things that might have concerned them in the previous session with a clearer idea of why they had felt in a particular way and how they could address this with the group.

By level 2, participants will already have considerable experience of reflecting on their work and their role in groups and should therefore be ready to work more independently and to further develop their overview of community and youth work theory and practice. Mary has recently developed and tutored on a level 2 module entitled 'Critical Reflection on Texts'. The aim of the module is 'to enhance participants' ability to critically examine texts and their relevance to good community

and youth work practice'. The module offered the opportunity for participants to further develop their critical skills by applying them specifically to the study of texts relevant to an area of work in which they were particularly interested. The module required a high level of independent study, but included six hours of group sessions and three hours of tutorial support. The group sessions focused more specifically on the process of reflection rather on the content of their study. Mary chose several extracts for participants to study which related to reflection in learning. All the participants found the pieces very challenging to read and understand, but thought it gave them a 'feel' for reading what they saw as very 'academic' pieces. They also related their ability to tackle these texts and find them relevant to their learning thus far on the Diploma program. Participants were able to identify what was relevant to them and why in the extracts they studied. For example, participants found a chapter by Kolb relevant and interesting because among other things:

- it was about learning theory;
- it demonstrated that experience was an important part of the learning process;
- they were able to relate it to their experience of learning while on the diploma programme.

Conclusion

Mary's experience as a community worker has taught her that recognizing and valuing experience, giving positive feedback and support builds skills, confidence and a sense of self-worth in individuals and groups which enables them to learn and develop. Her experience as a facilitator has confirmed that a similar process and methods facilitate learning in a formal setting. Community work offers the opportunity for both formal and informal learning, which is recognized as an important aspect of lifelong learning. Community workers are in a position to facilitate that learning and offer opportunities for further development. In order to respond to the changing circumstances and needs of the communities in which they work, they need to be able to reflect on their practice in order to continue learning from their day-to-day experience.

Holding this diploma in itself broadens workers opportunities and the Community Work Unit offers a number of ways for participants to continue their development:

- a professional qualification offers better employment/promotion prospects;
- an academic diploma improves access to other courses;
- the CWU modules are open to external participants, so past participants can take other modules as free-standing programmes;
- past participants have the opportunity to become assessors, supervisors or tutors for the CWU, and become members of the programme committee;
- development of post-qualification programmes and courses.

The age of technology, information and communications rewards those nations whose people learn new skills to stay ahead. The provision of lifelong learning for all is the new agenda for systems of education and training typically designed in another age and on the basis of three false premises: the idea that they should serve only an elite of fast learners; the belief that initial education can ever be sufficient; the prejudice that education and training are different in kind. These errors must be corrected in, and for, the learning society of the future. The idea of a learning society offers a broad vision. It rejects privilege and it transcends the principle of meritocracy. A learning society would

be a society characterized by high standards and low failure rates. The learning society trusts informed student demand. It abandons manpower planning, but instead takes great trouble to create an intelligent labour market and well-informed student demand. Such independent mature learners typically require five different kinds of continuing education and training: updating, retraining, remedial, broadening and integrative learning. The CWU is offering a Diploma programme which fulfils all of the above criteria.

Lifelong education, conceptualized as a means for facilitating lifelong learning should: last the whole life of each individual; lead to the systematic acquisition, renewal, upgrading and completion of knowledge, skills and attitudes, as become necessary in response to the constantly changing conditions of modern life, with the ultimate goal of promoting the self-fulfilment of each individual; be dependent for its successful implementation on people's increasing ability and motivation to engage in self-directed learning activities and acknowledge the contribution of all available educational influences including formal, non-formal and informal.

This article has explored the value of using experience as a basis for learning and the importance of reflection to turn that experience into learning. The importance of the process is that qualified community and youth workers should continue to reflect on their practice and so continue to learn and develop professionally. Some of the good habits practised on the programme should assist the process, for example, building and using formal and informal support networks, recording and finding opportunities for further training.

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