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# Participative methods for community action

The main rationale for participative methods is based on the belief that people themselves are best placed to know what their problems are and, with the right support, can develop the most appropriate solutions to those problems. It is therefore incumbent on workers to develop approaches which tap into that local knowledge and capacity for change. To do anything else is to impose external culture and values and, even for the best of reasons, further disempower the communities we work with. As Paulo Freire puts it:

*One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding.*  
(Freire, 1972, p93)

There is no such thing as a neutral position, and it has to be recognised that youth and community work is about taking sides. The National Occupational Standards for Community Development Work recognise this and identify promoting social justice as a core value underpinning practice. As the great American community organiser Saul Alinsky commented, this means taking the side of the have-nots, those who are left out and overlooked (1989). Workers therefore have to be on their guard for policies and initiatives which, although purporting to be for community empowerment, actually impose the vision, values and agenda of outside bodies.

The current social policy context in the UK has much to say about participation but not everything which claims to be participative gives local people a genuine say in the issues that affect their lives. Often what is described by professionals as participation is simply information giving, or a consultation exercise where the community is presented with a limited range of pre-determined options. Even where partnership structures are established there are usually significant power and resource imbalances between the community and agencies. Genuine examples of participation where the community has equality with agencies are rare.

It would be fair to say that youth and community workers often find themselves in the situation where they are trying to develop local participation in issues, services and events which have been decided outside the community. This could range from trying to get people to use the new 'one-stop shop', to getting participants for pre-decided training courses, to persuading people to engage in local authority-led community planning processes.

There are several implications which flow from this model of practice. Firstly, the fundamental power relationships within the community have not changed; external bodies are still making decisions on behalf of local people, albeit with some marginal choices being left to them. Secondly, the worker has to supply large amounts of time and emotional energy trying to persuade people that these are issues and services which are important to them. This can lead to workers burning out and communities feeling as if they are being battered by regular waves of new policies and initiatives and becoming even more 'apathetic' and 'hard to reach'. This calls into question the sustainability of this model, both for workers and communities. Finally, if all of this energy and effort is going into working with issues that are not necessarily the community's main concern it means that our practice

masks these real concerns and further silences and disempowers the community.

An alternative form of practice must therefore be employed. In the rest of this chapter we suggest that workers need, as their first point of departure, to help communities focus on the issues which are of concern to them and, importantly, which they are prepared and able to do something about. Let us then consider the role of the worker in this alternative model of practice.

## What is the worker's role?

Since the 1960s most youth and community workers have come to believe that their role is not that of the expert who decides what is best, but to help people themselves decide what their needs are and how best to meet them (Batten, 1967). However the role is multi-faceted, complex and contested by different theorists and stakeholders in the field of community development.

In the current social policy context in the UK workers find themselves caught between conflicting role demands. Indeed, this has always been so. On one hand the principles and

values of community development casts workers in the role of developing people's ability to think critically and act to effect authentic, sustainable social change. On the other there are expectations for them to be deliverers of services with prescribed targets and outputs to be met. Workers will have to negotiate and sometimes fight to have a space to practice under the first set of expectations in order to make a difference in the communities which they serve. As Peter McLaren puts it: *We require a revolutionary movement of educators informed by a principled ethics of compassion and social justice, a social ethos based on solidarity and social interdependence* (1998, p451).

Theorists such as Freire, McLaren and Ledwith suggest an approach to practice which is underpinned by particular concerns and commitments. Ledwith (2005) identifies five vital areas: a commitment to collective action for social and environmental justice; a process of empowerment through critical consciousness and participation; an analysis of power and discrimination; an understanding of the dominant ideas and the wider political context; and collective action based on this analysis which deals with root causes and not just symptoms. It is clear from this that the worker is not a blank canvas who, with no previous experience or values, seeks only to work with the community's agenda. Rather they are intentionally agents of change seeking to encourage sustainable social change through critical reflection and collective action.

This is particularly important here at the early part of the twenty-first century, because the current dominant ideology that shapes social policy and practice is that of the individual. Explanations of social problems centre increasingly around individual pathology or family inadequacies.

Therefore issues of youth unemployment might be understood in terms of lack of appropriate parenting and not in the context of wider societal and structural issues.

It becomes clear then that approaches to empowerment of communities in which workers simply go and ask people what they want are surely doomed to failure since, without a process of critical reflection, people will inevitably respond to symptoms rather than root causes and even the symptoms will be understood and responded to in the light of the dominant discourse of individual pathology.

And so the role of the worker in a model of practice which leads to genuine empowerment is this. Firstly, to have a thorough understanding of the issues which are important to the local community. Secondly, to understand the wider social and political context that gives rise to those local conditions. Thirdly, to develop processes whereby local people can critically reflect on their experiences in the context of the wider world. And finally,

to support a process of collective action that aims to achieve personal and social transformation.

## Problem-posing methods

As we have established, the first step in the process of a transformational practice is helping people to question the social reality in which they live, with all its injustices and contradictions, but which they experience as normality. Ira Shor (1993, p26) describes this as a process of questioning answers rather than merely answering questions. Through this process people cease to be objects and become writers of their own story (Jesson and Newman, 2004).

Within this model of practice workers develop materials and process which enable people to critically reflect on their social conditions and analyse them in the context of the wider world. This suggests a democratisation of learning since the knowledge which is created and the conclusion which is drawn are not within the gift of the worker but are created by the group. It also indicates a shifting of power from the individual expert to the group. Not that this is an easy or automatic process – far from it. Because of the unequal social relations we all live in, we automatically default to our socially conditioned roles. It is very common for workers to feel that they must have all the answers and for the groups they are working with to defer to their expertise and look for direction and answers. These ingrained social roles must be struggled against if real empowerment is to be achieved.

Problem-posing methods use codifications of generative themes as their starting point. Essentially, these are concrete representations of an aspect of people's lived reality. For example a group could be presented with photographs of housing conditions on their estate. This has the effect of enabling them to see again images that have become invisible to them. It is at this stage that the problem-posing method starts.

A typical range of questions that the group might explore are:

*Think of a group situation that you have been involved with recently.*

- *Who officially had power in this setting?*
- *Who else might have executed power through personality, relationships, etc.?*
- *How did that affect the functioning of the group?*
- *What messages were implicit in this about gender, class, ethnicity, etc.?*

*Assume that you are working with this group.*

- *How might you promote personal and social transformation?*
- *What power does the worker bring to this situation?*
- *What are the range of effects this could have on the group?*
- *How do you ethically justify intervening in this way?*
- *What do you see happening?*
- *Why is it happening this way?*
- *How do people feel in this situation?*
- *Whose interest does it serve?*
- *Who holds power in this situation?*
- *Is your experience the same or different to this?*
- *Are there any things happening economically or politically which are having an impact on this situation?*
- *Is there anything being done to improve this situation?*
- *Is there anything we could do to improve it?*
- *How might we do this?*
- *Who else could be involved?*

The result of these discussions will be a critical understanding of the issue, personal awareness of the individual's relationship to the issue, understanding that the issue is experienced collectively, and an outline for a programme of action. The role of the worker is to facilitate this process, to learn from it, but not to direct it. Inevitably this often raises

issues for the worker when the programme of action may conflict with agency agendas.

## Dialogue

Inherent in the worker's role to facilitate discussion is an understanding of the idea of dialogue. Freire describes dialogue as a form of revolutionary communication (Freire, 1972). From this we can see that he is describing not a mere conversation but communication set in a context of two transformed relationships; this is an intentional process. Although it is not prescriptive in its outcomes it is trying to achieve something in particular and that is *conscientisation*. This is a state which Freire describes as

*[a] particular quality of critical awareness which enables people to consider a range of options in the ways they act, and enables them to choose a course of action deliberately and with the intention to change some aspect of their reality.*  
(1972, p101)

It is built on two sets of transformed relationships: the relationship between teachers and learners, and the relationship between learners and knowledge.

*Educator and learners all become learners assuming the same attitude as cognitive subjects discovering knowledge through one another and through the objects they try to know. It is not a situation where one knows and the others do not; it is rather a search, by all, at the same time to discover something by the act of knowing which cannot exhaust all the possibilities in the relation between object and subject.*

(Freire, 1976, p115)

In order to achieve this transformation, the worker must understand the culture and community which is the social location of the learner and then cross the border. In that way they act in solidarity with the learners; no longer seeing them as *the other* (Mayo, 1999). The starting point for this learning process is that no one knows the full picture, neither the teacher nor the learner, but that together we can discover new knowledge. This does not mean that the worker has the same role as the learner but that they have complementary roles in the group as the whole group both teaches and learns.

As an example, a youth worker might want to discuss sexual health with a group of young people. In a traditional form of practice what was to be learned would be decided by the worker; this could be the use of condoms, the nature of sexual diseases, and/or available health resources. The worker might then set up group discussions, screen videos, distribute leaflets and arrange visits to other projects in order to enable the group to learn what the worker had decided were the important lessons for the group. We can see that in this model, the worker does not learn but only teaches, and the group learns. No matter how well meaning, this is external knowledge imposed on the group from outside. For people to act on knowledge they must believe in it, and this is unlikely to happen when it is simply the case of adults once again telling them what is right and wrong.

By contrast a transformational approach to the subject of sexual health would be qualitatively different. The worker, realising she does not know all there is to know about the sexual health issues that are important to the group, would seek to know what young people understand, experience and feel about sexual health issues, as well as understanding the received wisdom about safe sex practices. These elements would then be explored by the group through dialogue. Within this, understandings and assumptions would be challenged in order to develop authentic understanding of how people are positioned within the issue. The outcome of the dialogue would not be known since it is developed by the group and not the worker. They might think that issues of identity and power are more central to them in making positive decisions about their sexual behaviour. This might also include much of the information contained in the traditional approach but the young people themselves would decide what was useful and how it fitted into their own understanding

of the world. In this way an internal impetus for change is developed rather than the external imposition of the traditional approach.

From this we can see that within traditional forms of practice, knowledge is seen as a commodity which must be successfully transmitted from teachers to learners. To paraphrase Foucault, *knowledge is power*, and youth and community workers need to recognise this fundamental point. Within transformative education, existing knowledge is the starting point and is to be critically examined through co-investigation of the learning group. Through this process of co-investigation new understandings are developed and new knowledge is created. Because this knowledge is created and owned by the group it has power.

Part of the effectiveness of this social approach to learning is its ability to enable us to analyse our assumptions – why we think the things we think. This can reveal the boundaries which block us from developing new ideas and new action.

## What is a generative theme?

In order to galvanise community action, the worker must first identify issues about which people have a passion and a willingness to take some action. Freire calls these issues generative themes. He identifies domination and liberation as the overarching or global generative themes. These global themes are expressed at every level within society. People experience them as boundary situations. An example of a boundary situation from community-based education is the very common experience of working with a group of community activists who, although intelligent and able, feel stupid and non-educable. This understanding of themselves could have been produced by things teachers have said to them, failing in formal education and believing when they are told by other members of the community that education is not for them. However it is produced, it feels like a real and insurmountable barrier which will effectively keep them from risking education; which further strengthens the barrier. Only when they begin to see an alternative future for themselves and are able to see the injustice of the education system that failed them and a society which is prepared to put them on the scrapheap – and get angry about it – do they have the ability to challenge that barrier.

A generative theme is an issue about which people feel strongly and are willing to take some action about. Much of the government-sponsored youth and community work we see today flows out of centrally determined strategies by which local issues and projects are identified. This results in workers spending much of their time recruiting local people into programmes that they did not choose. This is not only inefficient but it casts workers as subjects and the community as objects to be worked on thereby strengthening feelings of alienation and disempowerment.

However, a generative theme is not something that comes automatically; it has to be worked for. This is in part because our education system does not invite us to be critical thinkers, leading us to passively accept the situations we find ourselves in. On one occasion I was talking to a young man who lived in a run-down area of Glasgow. When I asked him if he had ever experienced any discrimination in his life he said no. This was despite the fact that he had been unemployed for several years, had addiction problems and was living in poor-standard housing in a state of long-term poverty. It was several days into the programme we were going through that he came back to me in amazement. 'I've been discriminated against all my life!' he said, but up to that point he hadn't been able to see it and could not therefore take any steps to change.

It is also difficult because encounters between workers and the people they work with are encounters of power. The workers, whether they want it or not, have status, experience, and access to resources. The community have learned to be dependent, reliant on authority figures and passive. An essential element in the process of individual and social transformation is the struggle to transform this worker/client – teacher/learner relationship. Through dialogue, which we discuss in detail below, people find voice and value

which can enable, even briefly, these contradictions to be transcended. It is this experience that begins to build a vision of a more human, more democratic, more nurturing and creative world.

Often communities are described as apathetic but their education and experience has taught and conditioned them to be passive and silent. The worker must therefore find creative ways to enable people to re-see their lives and to examine their assumptions, what they have taken for granted about it. This examination is often a disturbing and emotional process leaving people feeling angry that they have endured the situation for so long. This emotional energy is an indispensable aspect of a transformational process; it is the fuel that initiates and sustains action. If the issue you are working on does not engender emotion and passion, it is not a generative theme; any action that flows from it is likely to fizzle out or require the worker to cajole people along.

## Listening surveys

Traditional forms of practice usually rely on qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide an evidence base for practice. The inherent danger in these approaches is that inevitably the worker's own experience and value-base will shape the issues focused on, and the questions asked will in turn shape the answers obtained and the action that results. For example an organisation which has been set up to deliver skills training to get people back into work may well carry out some initial research to identify what the community wants. It will of course ask training-related questions and get training-related answers. This will then justify the action they take within the community as being 'community-led'. It is obvious that if you asked the same group of people different questions, you would get a very different picture of what the community needed.

Often these studies treat local communities and the people within them as data sets to be analysed. Needs are usually ascribed according to agency priorities rather than the openly expressed views of local people. The overall effect is to treat people as objects for analysis rather than subjects who have the right to self-determination. The Freirean approach seeks to reverse these power relationships and support local people to define both the needs of the area in which they live and the solution to their problems. Key to this process is the creation of generative themes. An example of a generative theme is shown in Table 8.1.

One practical way of identifying a generative theme within a community is by carrying out a listening survey. Listening in this context denotes a permanent attitude on the part of the subject who is listening, of being open to the word of the other, to the gesture of the other, to the differences of the other (Freire, 1998, p107). The key skill in a listening survey is having an open mind. As Purcell commented:

*For this (listening survey) to work it is important to adopt the Zen approach of expecting nothing. That is to be open to anything and any interpretation and not to approach with a mind fixed on particular sets of issues or an attachment to a specific course of action.*

(Purcell, 2005, p239)

Table 8.1 Generative themes

Theme	Economic causes of the problem	Who controls the decision-making on the problem?	What are the culture, values and beliefs held about the problem?	What is the present national, provincial, and/or local policy on the problem?
Young people drinking on street corners	Limited disposable income; Access to cheap drink; Lack of job prospects; Few youth venues	Parents; Shop owners; Police; Local authority	Drinking is a sign of being grown up; Need to drink to be accepted by peer group	WHO Declaration on Young People and Alcohol, 2001; Crime & Disorder Act 1998; Parenting Orders; Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997

A listening survey can be a challenging task as people's feelings may be contradictory and are seldom clearly expressed. Often a 'presenting issue' such as young people on the streets may be a symptom which hides the underlying issues (for example the lack of youth provision and difficult home environments).

Hope and Timmel (1999) outline the nature of a listening survey. Teams of workers, often made up of a mixture of development workers and local people, seek to identify the issues within the community that people have the strongest feelings about. The process is to find situations where people are involved in informal conversations – shops, bars, outside schools, waiting rooms, etc. – and listen for the issues about which people are worried, happy, sad, angry or fearful. In particular the team is listening for issues which relate to six themes which are common to groups of people living together:

- 1 meeting basic physical needs;
- 2 relationships between people;
- 3 community decision-making processes and structures;
- 4 education and socialisation;
- 5 recreation and beliefs;
- 6 values.

The key issues are then presented back to the community by the use of codes – discussed in detail in the next chapter – which lead to critical reflection and collective action.

## Chapter Review

Workers must seek out generative themes within communities in order to harness the energy and passion to achieve social change. Genuine participation will come about through engaging people in the critical examination of their lives and providing structures to support action on the themes that emerge. This approach to working with people seeks to support empowerment that leads to genuine change. As such it acts as an antidote and stands as a critique of top-down approaches which seek only to ameliorate symptoms and pacify people.

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