

Active Learning for Active Citizenship — Lessons from Britain?

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Abstract

While this paper would contribute to deliberations within both streams at this conference, it is aimed primarily at those focussing on practice. I combine my research and consultancy work with a part-time secondment to the Civil Renewal Unit at the Home Office in Britain. This follows on from many years of work as a community worker and academic, involved in projects such as local Citizens' Juries.

Like the Queensland Government, the current British Government is committed to encouraging more people to be active in their communities and public life more generally. As part of this, the Civil Renewal Unit are presently developing policy and supporting practice that builds community capacity. Within this context I am leading a project to encourage 'Active Learning for Active Citizenship', emphasising the knowledge and strength of people active in 'bottom-up' action within civil society. The project is a fascinating partnership between government and the voluntary and community sector.

The paper aims not just to help people learn about the Active Learning for Active Citizenship project, but also to stimulate discussion about some of the ways forward for practice, policy and theory development generated by the project, by presenting a necessarily brief snapshot of progress so far. The seven Active Learning for Active Citizenship hubs provide varied valuable insights into issues related to engaging communities and provide some models of potential use for those involved in trying to improve democracy worldwide. To maximise learning about positive ways forward, the hubs are deliberately working in different ways and focussing on different key aspects within an overarching framework.

Keywords

Civil-renewal, active, democracy, learning, citizenship

Introduction

While Queensland has earned an enviable worldwide reputation for developing initiatives aimed at encouraging active democracy, I am confident that Britain's Active Learning for Active Citizenship project will contribute to reflections at this conference.

I am seconded part-time from the Social Research and Regeneration Unit at the University of Plymouth to coordinate this short-term project at the Civil Renewal Unit of the Home Office. Before becoming an academic and 'pseudo' civil servant, I practised as a community worker for many years. I therefore have feet firmly in both academic and practice streams of interest.

The background to ALAC

In 1998 Sir Bernard Crick claimed that Citizenship Education aimed:

“... at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting” (QCA 1998, p. 8).

This led to citizenship education in schools.

The structure of ALAC

Sir Bernard and others then went on to expand such ideas into the non-formal and informal educational sector through work at the Home Office. This led to the Civil Renewal Unit publishing the report *Active Learning for Active Citizenship in the voluntary and community sector*, compiled by myself (Woodward 2004). The recommendations in that report then formed an action research project funded by the Home Office and my secondment continued so as to coordinate project implementation. The first recommendation is that voluntary and community sector groups interested and committed to developing active learning for active citizenship be resourced to work within a number of sub-regional 'learning hubs'.

The word hub was chosen to illustrate concepts of small localised programs coming together and relating to a central core through radiating spokes. These spokes in the hubs should allow two-way dialogue and continual learning amongst all practitioners and participants. ALAC learning hubs are therefore active and dynamic structures penetrating into often diffuse areas. They have been established in South Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, the Black Country, Lincoln, London, Tees Valley and the South West.

They embrace diverse methods within diverse settings, but all work within the framework outlined in the ALAC report and form part of empowering community based educational initiatives. The other two recommendations are the formation of a steering group, and this continues to guide progress within the project along with evaluation by an external body, now being carried out by Goldsmiths College. However, through being part of the national ALAC program, the hubs themselves share reflections on value-added by their work and about the difference that *active learning for active citizenship* can make to individual learners, their communities, and the structures of our world, promoting the core values of social justice, participation, equality and diversity and cooperation.

This has produced an energetic, innovative and inspirational network, providing opportunities to share learning with policy makers and with other professionals as well as the networks being forged within each learning hub.

Empowering education

The framework provided by the ALAC report specifies that participants in ALAC hubs be encouraged to connect their everyday lives to the worlds of politics, understanding better the opportunities and barriers to action and change. The educational experiences must be active and involve learners in dialogue rather than being passive recipients of abstract wisdom. The program aims to be empowering and stresses alternative ways of knowing, learning and teaching. Participants therefore enter an educational process that creates benefits for themselves at the same time as challenging taken-for-granted aspects of their lives and subsequently working to alter inequalities in power. Empowerment is not something that is done to participants, rather it takes place through more subtle processes whereby people come to recognise their own situation and develop the ability to do something about it. To accept that people face structural influences that they cannot fully overcome without structural change, does not deny that they can act creatively for reasons that make sense to them and that can therefore contribute to the processes of sustainable structural change. If power relations form part of everyday life and are constantly shifting as people negotiate their way through the world, there are opportunities for people to learn how to practise such negotiations as increasingly autonomous active citizens. Community work has long been practised around ideas that building community capacity can alter power relations (Barr et al. 2000; CDF 2001; Community Learning Scotland 2001; Crowther et al. 2001; Hashagen 2002; Tett 2003). However, empowerment processes cannot eliminate unequal power relations, only make their exercise more visible and therefore open to democratic processes of change.

Improving democracy

Therefore, active citizens need to have a good understanding of the complexities of power, together with a critical or questioning stance, an attitude of inquiry, scepticism towards authority and an interest in the world around them. Such an understanding involves far more than the acquisition of facts. Indeed, simply learning data about existing structures without an accompanying critical reflection on that data, and possible meanings associated with the data, could be regarded as inhibiting healthy democracy. People need to feel there is some point in active participation, not just how to do it and political situations need to offer possibilities for action. Therefore as the European Commission declared, “democracies have to create the conditions for an active exercise of citizenship” (European Commission 2001, p. 7).

According to a 2005 Electoral Commission and Hansard research report on political engagement in Britain, “it seems clear that many of those who say they are uninterested in

politics do so because of how they interpret the concept” (The Electoral Commission and Hansard 2005, p. 20). “Only a minority link “politics” with their own personal involvement; it tends to be seen as something done by, and for, others or as a system with which they are not particularly enamoured” (The Electoral Commission and Hansard 2005, p. 21). “More than half the public, 54%, feel they know either “not very much” or “nothing at all” about politics while barely a majority, 53%, find it of interest and only a minority are politically active’, (16%)” (The Electoral Commission and Hansard 2005, pp. 7, 17). However, “twice as many people are very interested in national issues as in politics and even more are very interested in local issues” (The Electoral Commission and Hansard 2005, p. 20).

ALAC contributes to creating a greater awareness of how everyday life is indeed political through the educational processes instigated at the hubs. Participants display disillusionment with politics rather than a lack of willingness to be active, consolidating the findings in the Electoral Commission and Hansard report that, “contrary to claims of political “apathy”, people are interested in the issues that affect them, their families and the world around them”, yet while most have a strong aspiration to have a say in how the country is run, few feel they have any opportunities for influence (The Electoral Commission and Hansard 2005, pp. 23-4). As Peter Hall says, “social capital is still strong but there is a serious decline in public trust” (Hall 2002). There is a support for democracy as a principle but not democracy as perceived in everyday lives (Clarke 2004). Sir Bernard Crick lays the blame on politicians and the media for an obsession with spin (cited in Barnard 2005, p. 3).

The national ALAC program intends to influence existing processes of politics, leading to a new democratic order that “draws upon different components of direct, consultative, deliberative and participative democracy” (Pratchett 2000, p. 9).

“Whereas the equality theorist argues for integration into existing democratic structures, the difference perspective seeks to reverse the order of things: to place at the centre that which is currently marginalised, to value that which is currently devalued, to privilege that which is currently subordinated” (Squires 2001, p. 10).

Community and identity

To feel an interest in the world around them, people need to experience feelings of collective identity. Yet, while it is far easier for policy development and practice intervention to work with communities as if they exist as fixed entities, ALAC hubs recognise the intricacies of community.

“Communities consist of complex and dynamic networks of interaction and identity. These change; they overlap and embody sometimes contradictory loyalties. Communities reflect local circumstances and are shaped by events at home and abroad. We fashion our personal identity from a kaleidoscope of our own and other

people's behaviour. We explore similarities and differences through our relationship with others, setting up broad, but shifting ideas of who we are" (Gilchrist 2004, p. 6).

Diversity and cohesion

This shifting nature of collective identities creates inevitable tensions for community based practice. However, ALAC hubs recognise diversity and cohesion as a powerful and dynamic force (Castles and Davidson 2000) in pragmatic terms. Between them the ALAC hubs are targeting a wide range of individuals and groups with a particular focus upon groups who have been identified as being disproportionately at risk of disadvantage and/or discrimination, many of whom have been considered relatively hard to reach in terms of educational provision, whether because of caring responsibilities, language barriers, or other practical or motivational barriers (such as lack of confidence) or structural inequalities.

ALAC hubs

So, for example, the ALAC hub in the Black Country, part of the West Midlands, concentrates on work with women. "Men are very much more likely to feel knowledgeable about politics than women" (The Electoral Commission and Hansard 2005, p. 8) and concepts of active citizenship are often associated with the masculine public world in contrast to the feminine private world (Puwar 2004, p. 67). Work at the Black Country hub recognises that while "social capital has been sustained in Britain largely by virtue of the increasing participation of women in the community" (Hall 1999, p. 437), such political action is often hidden because the activities many women prefer are not classified as political. Participants are therefore encouraged to look at their everyday actions, and reflect on these in terms of power, participation and leadership. Trips to the parliaments in London and Brussels help participants further consider structures they may or may not wish to engage with. Residential weekends allow experiences to be discussed, creating a "Social, Political and Active Citizenship Educational" space of resistance from which to challenge the hierarchies, assumption, language and conventions of the male-dominated world (Rose 1997).

The provision of space for reflection is similarly a core aspect of work at the South Yorkshire ALAC hub. This includes a 'Globalisation and Local Action' course, which builds on previous work organised by the Workers Educational Association. Explicit links between people's local experience and global issues are built in through examining the global political economy of supermarkets, their part in the food chain and their impact on local shopping. Learning outcomes are then being transferred to consideration of a local redevelopment issue. As is happening all over Britain, there are plans to clear small local shops so that a large superstore can be built. This could provide a source of cheaper food and arguably greater choice. The ethical and practical issues involved are being researched and discussed by participants at the hub along with representatives from local Liberian and Sudanese communities.

Similarly, work at the other hubs creates spaces for active, reflexive learning, with a variety of communities including those with learning disabilities and their carers and refugees and migrants. Disillusionment with politics is being directly tackled in Hartlepool where residents famously elected a monkey as their mayor.

Sustainability

These examples can only give a flavour of the dynamic work being carried out within ALAC hubs. Despite ALAC being a short-term project that is relatively poorly resourced, the project is an exciting one that I am pleased and proud to be associated with. However, building community capacity for civil renewal does not mesh well with piecemeal funding. As stated in the ALAC report, "those who suffer the greatest from short term funding are already most vulnerable to social exclusion and less likely to become active citizens in any context" (Woodward 2004, p. 6). All organisations making up the regional hubs have weathered short-term funding in the past and are already considering ways to ensure the valuable work they are doing does not vanish when funding runs out in March 2006. ALAC was set up specifically to produce lessons for sustainable and long-term development of active learning for active citizenship in the voluntary and community sector and this paper forms part of that process.

Conclusion

ALAC is a small but energetic Home Office program, offering pointers for the way communities can become more engaged and active at a time when apathy, or antipathy, towards politicians and the political process has never seemed greater (Barnard 2005, p. 3). ALAC builds on people's experiences and everyday lives to encourage reflection on how immediate worlds fit in broader worlds. ALAC injects the energy of people acting locally with a global analysis and a realistic policy drive.

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