Teaching Popular Education to University Community Education Students

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In the generic field of education the dominant positivist paradigm conceives of contradictions as problems that require resolutions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.7). In popular education it is important that we help people to understand the nature of the contradictions. The dualism of positivist thinking requires that we prove the correctness of one idea over another. Whereas in the dialectical approach which typifies popular education, contradictions are not a problem but are rather an opportunity to problematise. Learning to live with contradictions is to accept the sense in which opposing ideas are often mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 34). Opposing ideas can exist together as necessary ends of a continuum of ideas. Where we position ourselves in the space between these ideas will shift and change dependent on the intricacies of the context in which we find ourselves.

There is an emerging focus on happiness and well being in UK and Scottish policy circles at present (see http://www.dh.gov.uk , Stratton, 2010). No surprise perhaps given that as establishments across the globe attempt to resolve the contradictions inherent in a world dominated by the interests of capital, they should turn to the inner-psyche as a realm which might be separated from the increasingly impoverished material experience of people. Looked at from a critical theory perspective this duality of mind and material experience is a form of contradiction denial. If we focus our attention on what makes people happy we might distract them from the material reality of their position. The contradiction of material inequality is denied through the assertion of transcendental feelings of contentment and inner senses of well-being. As if to make the point the political philosopher Roger Scrutton (1989) argues that Conservative values and beliefs hold that individual happiness is to be valued over the achievement of collective rights. For him the sustained influence of established institutions of society leads to a sense of stability, which in turn, produces a sense of personal security and certainty which holds the promise of a deeper sense of personal contentment. In his opinion Conservatism favours ‘a quiet but pragmatic politics whose principal concern is to maintain the ship of state afloat on the sea of destiny’ (Scrutton, 1989, p. 8) Historically, Scrutton believes, the liberal propensity to challenge the authority of

established institutions produces mistrust, instability and insecurity. According to Scrutton, Liberal versions of freedom are seen as ‘abstract’ and ‘tend to corrupt, under the impact of human resentment, into the antinomian wilfulness of revolution’ (1989, p. 9) Or, the more we learn to question the fundamental authority of societal institutions, the more we are likely to reach the conclusion that everything needs changed including the assumptions about why power and wealth are so inequitably distributed. If this is all based on contradiction denial then perhaps we have to encourage a sense of revealing and addressing contradictions in our educational practice with people and communities.

As we prepare emerging generations of community educators to inhabit this world of apparent contradiction it would seem important that they are assisted to understand the nature and purpose of contradictions and to learn ways to engage communities in the struggle to establish a dialectical relationship that can enable them to seize and engage with the opportunities that they present. In this paper I want to outline how in my work as a University teacher I set out to help students of community education understand the latent power of contradictions and how they might tap their power to release people from the tendency to conformity.

Community education in the Scottish context represents an attempt to imply a shared educational practice across the fields of Youth Work, Adult Education and Community Development. In my work I teach a series of courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level which have to do with the educational role of the community education worker and the understanding of the relationship between educational purpose and methodological practice. While the ideas are all taught at different levels of sophistication they tend to focus round four core conceptual themes and their concomitant methodological practices. The themes are posed as contradictions in order to emphasise their problematic nature. They are: Experience and Immersion; Knowledge and Understanding; Dialogue and Monologue; Activity and Praxis. It is these four themes that I would like to explore in this paper. My sense is that these four themes are those which distinguish the main conceptual and practical themes of popular education thinking and practice from other forms of education.

Experience and Immersion – Discovering our Unfreedom

In her comprehensive review of thinking around experience and experiential learning Fenwick (2012 www.ualberta.ca) demonstrates that the terms are profoundly contested concepts whose meanings lie deep at the heart of

philosophical and ideological understandings of the epistemological purposes of education. The centrality of the question of what experience is and what its role is in the process of human understanding, pervades all areas of educational debate. In the courses I teach, the contradiction that is presented to the students is one in which we can help people understand experience in a more critical way.

Saddington argues that there are three main schools of thought which broadly summarise the use of experience as a source of learning. These are 'Progressive', 'Humanist' and 'Radical' and are characterised as seeking to achieve educational goals which aim for in turn: 'Reform'; 'Self-Actualisation' and 'Social Transformation' (1998, p.134). All three goals are legitimate goals to strive for but we tend in the work I refer to the emphasise is on the Humanist/Radical forms of thinking and practise as being most relevant to the nature of a popular education approach to community education in Scotland. "Starting where people are at" has become almost axiomatic as a point of initiation in the educational encounter between practitioners and the communities with whom they work. This starting point reflects a commitment to the idea of curriculum based in and coming from the concerns of those we work with and for. This position rejects the positivist notion that there are things to know which must be transmitted by the educator, in favour of the interpretive paradigm which asserts the need to understand how things are perceived in order to integrate new understandings with those that already exist (see Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.7). Mezirow indicates the importance and urgency of the need to deal first with understandings of experience:

A defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know to avoid the threat of chaos. If we are unable to understand, we often turn to tradition, thoughtlessly seize explanations by authority figures, or resort to various psychological mechanisms, such as projection and rationalisation, to create imaginary meanings.

(Mezirow, 2000, p. 6)

Mezirow's assertion that understanding the meaning of our experience defines us as human beings presents us with a clear and central task in educational terms, to engage with experience in a careful and attentive way which takes seriously the frameworks of understanding that people have developed and what purposes these serve. Freire uses the term 'existential experience' (1972, p.47) to indicate the

process by which we simply experience the events of life as de-historicised and temporal occurrences which we find ways of integrating/confirming our existing views of why and how things happen. We all accumulate experiences often as a random collection of events from which we try to make patterns of understanding based on existing frames of understanding. The patterns we make are often given to us but the real art in pattern making is to eventually make our own.

For Mezirow, the task of pattern making is made urgent by the threat of a deterioration into chaos as we fail to make sense of the events before us and, as a result, we often turn to other people's explanations to make sense of things for us. In this sense of avoiding making meaning for ourselves, he echoes the work of Erich Fromm who believed that freedom was an aspect of human nature that we either embrace or escape. Fromm observed that embracing our freedom of will to make our own patterns was healthy, whereas fleeing from freedom through the use of escape mechanisms was the root of psychological conflicts.

There is only one possible, productive solution for the relationship of individualized man [sic] with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual….

However, if the economic, social and political conditions… do not offer a basis for the realization of individuality in the sense just mentioned, while at the same time people have lost those ties which gave them security, this lag makes freedom an unbearable burden.

It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life which lacks meaning and direction. Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom.

(Fromm, 1941, pp.36-7)

Three main escape mechanisms that Fromm (1942) outlined are 'automaton conformity' (p. 158), authoritarianism (p. 122), and destructiveness (p. 153). Automaton conformity is changing one's ideal self to what is perceived as the preferred type of personality of society, losing one's true self. The use of automaton

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conformity displaces the burden of choice from the self to society. Authoritarianism is allowing oneself to be controlled by another. This removes the freedom of choice almost entirely by submitting that freedom to someone else. Lastly, destructiveness is any process which attempts to harm or eliminate self or others (e.g. addiction, suicide, self-harm, violence or abuse etc) to escape freedom.

Freire drew on Fromm's ideas in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and deploys the concept of 'fear of freedom' (1972, p.28) directly in the development of his notion of the culture of silence which he argues, pervades the lives of oppressed people and is the result of the process of colonisation which produces a profound sense of inferiority. The 'unbearable burden' of freedom that Fromm describes is manifest in Freire's terms in the internalisation of oppressive values by colonised people and in their mimicry of the colonising culture.

Understanding experience is then central to our educational task to help people to be free from conformity, control and destructiveness and to develop their own sense of individuality, autonomy and self-respect. The educational methods courses teach students approaches to working with people which help them examine their experience in an active way and to begin to recognise evidence of their personal and shared cultural escape routes. Students are taught to begin the educational encounter with reference to people's experience. So they are encouraged to begin with questions like: What is your experience of this? Where have you come across this? Do you remember a time when this happened? What is your view on…..? So in a session where the group is considering the problem of food poverty we might begin by asking the participants to talk about where and how they shop for food? Whether they have ever shopped in other areas of town? Why some shops have more choice than others? Etc.

This is not merely a warm-up exercise to get people involved but is rather a powerful indication that each encounter begins with reference to participants own experiences and their views on them. Knowledge begins when their views are considered first before other views are introduced. The students set the tone and raise the first questions and problems to be addressed. In a structural shift, which is both practical and symbolic of a more democratic learning relationship, the participants talk first and the teacher listens attentively. Of course the act of sharing experience is not, in and of itself, necessarily a liberating one. We may simply rehearse experiences or recycle them without any form of critical analysis of their significance and implications. To introduce a more critical understanding of experience we require the intervention of alternative readings of our experience

through the introduction of knowledge that is new to the group.

Knowledge and Understanding – Teaching freedom

Festinger's (1957) theory of 'cognitive dissonance' explains the discomfort caused by holding conflicting ideas simultaneously and the tendency to resolve this by integrating these into new or existing frameworks of understanding. The introduction of new knowledge can contradict long held beliefs and present people with feelings of dissonance that they have to resolve or reject. Festinger notes people's proclivity to rationalise contradictions by retreating into often irrational explanations similar to Fromm's retreat from freedom. Bringing new knowledge to interact with experiences and offer alternative analyses of events is designed to create the potential for such dissonance. Shor describes these moments of dissonance as 'extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary' (1988, p. 93), or finding new ways to see those things that we are familiar with, used to, and comfortable in. The prism of our dissonance thus allows us a new way of seeing which can shock us out of our non-critical state into one of uncertainty, doubt and therefore the potential for change through critical awareness.

As Kirkwood (1991) argues, there is a degree of ambivalence and in some cases antagonism towards the idea of teaching among community educators. It springs from a well established view of community educators standing outside the formal educational sector and often working with people who have been failed by formal educational structures and alienated by the authoritarian approaches adopted by educational institutions. This oppositional stance and the adoption by many practitioners of the person centred approach of Carl Rogers (1962) has encouraged an antipathy towards anything that might be perceived to be teaching in an informal educational setting. However it is worth pointing out that Rogers himself was not against teaching *per se,* he simply felt it was over-rated as a starting point for education. Indeed in Kurt Lewin's T-Groups (heavily influenced by person centred thinking) he recognised that external knowledge should be brought in to stretch and challenge the experience of the group. The role of the educator in the group went well beyond that of a mere passive facilitator to that of a more active researcher of knowledge for the group. Seeking out ideas, frameworks, images that might offer an alternative view beyond the experience of the group was called for. These he called cognitive aids:

This particular aspect was drawn from developments in psychoeducational and

cognitive-behavioural group therapy. It entailed the provision of models or organizing ideas through the medium of brief lectures and handouts (and later things like film clips or video).

(Yalom, 1995, pp. 488-489)

In the courses referred to we introduce an alternative view of the role of teaching as bringing critical knowledge to the group. Finding new ways of looking at familiar problems in challenging ways. So, in the case of the example given above, in a programme exploring food poverty we may introduce a range of statistics about average family spend on foods or food production costs as compared to supermarket profits.

New knowledge does not have to be presented in authoritarian ways in which the educator appears omniscient and the oracle of new knowledge. Educators can choose to bring new knowledge to the group in both transparent and open ways which are to be critically engaged with from the perspective of students' experiences. Transparency in method choice is critical to the de-mystification of the teaching process. Methods like Timelining which make clear the construction of the teaching/learning structure. e.g.

Food Poverty Session – 7.00 – 9.30 pm Tuesday 10th February 2012			
7.00	7.40	8.00	9.00 9.30
Experience	New Knowledge	Dialogue	Review
Margaret	Brian	David	Lorna
Our experiences of Shopping.	Some statistics about the costs of food and supermarket profits.	What did you think when you heard these statistics? How does this affect what we feed our families? Why do some shops have more choice of things? What alternatives might there be to the supermarkets?	As a result of what we have discussed: What have you learned? What would you like to know more about? What would you like to do? How did the session go? What should we change?

Using the timeline allows everyone to see the plan for the session and agree the structure in terms of time and content. Times spent on the various activities are visually represented in this method. The names against each part of the session indicate which participant is in charge of the structure at each point of the encounter. Elements of power and accountability are thus shared as the review ends the session with a discussion on structure as well as content.

Openness in terms of content requires the educator to show the source of their knowledge in order to demonstrate its provenance rather than it being part of their

omniscient, innate knowledge. Jo Kincheloe captures the spirit of this when he states:

In modernist positivism, teachers are often disempowered in their role as information deliverers, servants of knowledge and curricula produced elsewhere. In the new paradigm we advocate that class-room teachers take charge of developing courses of study emerging from their conception of both what is truly important and useful in the lives of the particular students they are teaching.

(Kincheloe, 1998, p. 13)

Kincheloe asserts the need for a new paradigm for educators which places the interests of the participants at the heart of their educational choices. Having invited people to explore and expose their understandings of their experience, the introduction of new knowledge becomes the opportunity to help people gain critical distance and encounter alternative readings of their experience. For example, where people experience feelings of negative self-worth due to the inferiorisation of their class, gender, culture, learning that their community of identity has a history, a literature and a politics can have a dissonant affect which counters the inferiorisation process and places in question the grounds upon which they base their negative self-image.

Dialogue and Monologue – Finding freedom through others

Thus the discovery was made that learning is best facilitated in an environment where there is dialectic tension and conflict between immediate, concrete experience and analytic detachment. By bringing together the immediate experiences of the trainees and the conceptual models of the staff in an open atmosphere where inputs from each perspective could challenge and stimulate the other, a learning environment occurred with remarkable vitality and creativity.

(Kolb, 1984, p.10)

If we are to accept Festinger’s argument, the introduction of new knowledge in itself is no guarantee of what Mezirow calls ‘transformative thinking’. The development of dialogue in which participants are lead through a structured exploration of their

extant understandings and how these might be integrated with the new knowledge they have encountered has the potential for transformation. This is the critical point. The aim of dialogue then is to recognise the contradictions which cognitive dissonance produces and enable new understandings to be explored so as to enable students to accommodate the often contradictory co-existence of feelings and knowledge. The exploration of the role of dialogue as the process of integrating experience and new knowledge is considered both in terms of the understanding of dialogue and the skills required to structure a dialogical exchange.

Conceptually, dialogue is taught as a human encounter in which perception and understanding are experienced by the participants. It is not a cosy chat nor is it a place to be told how to think. It is rather a place of challenge and confirmation where out of the synthesis of old knowledge and new, fresh meaning can emerge. According to Bohm and Peat ‘ the purpose of dialogue is to reveal the incoherence in our thought. In so doing it becomes possible to discover or re-establish a genuine, creative and collective consciousness’ (1987, p. 241). Practically the students are taught the skills of developing dialogue: listening, structuring, paraphrasing and consensus building. They are taught how to structure dialogue through the use of a method known as ‘Focussed Conversation’ (Stanfield, 2000). The method encourages the collective analysis of individual perceptions through deepening levels of questions which help to expose individual perceptions to challenge and contradiction and to help participants try to achieve new forms of common understanding. In the example timeline shown above we can see the design of questions using the method as they move through the levels entitled Objective, Reflective, Interpretive and Decisional (Stanfield, 2000, p. 26). Gadamer attempts to capture the spirit of the process:

[It] is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is a characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself [sic] to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. The thing that has to be grasped is the objective rightness or otherwise of his opinion, so that they can agree with each other on a subject.

(Gadamer, 1979, p. 347).

Praxis

The sub-heading for many of the courses referred to is ‘The Creation of Praxis’. Praxis is an ancient Greek word which meant simply activity engaged in by free people. According to Aristotle there were three forms of human activity: theoretical, practical and the mixture of the both. Practical theory he named praxis. We might imply from this that he might have meant that free people are those who make theory practice and practice theoretical.

In Freire’s terms, praxis brings together the ideas of action and reflection, theory and practice together in the one word (1972). The idea of reasoned, and reasonable action, thus become the mark of the truly free human being. According to Hannah Arendt, engaging in praxis is what makes us uniquely human (Arendt, 1958).

The courses referred to are designed to help students engage in praxis themselves. As educators we should be committed to the development of our own praxis, our own freedom. Margaret Ledwith writes about authentic praxis:

In my opinion, ‘being critical’ is not an intellectual state of mind; it is located in praxis. In order to avoid ‘armchair revolution’ on one hand, or ‘pure activism’ on the other, it requires action and reflection in symbiotic relation in order to move nearer to what Freire calls ‘authentic praxis’.

(2011, p. 598).

Praxis is not something that happens spontaneously or incidentally as if by chance. We cannot simply come across it unexpectedly. It is part of a planned, structured, pre-conceived set of experiences which are designed to lead people through a process of learning which passes through a series of structured action and reflection cycles. Referring once again to the example timeline given above we can see how the process of praxis is structured in to the educational encounter as each session ends with a review of learning and possible action that may be carried out by the group members.

The premise of all of these courses is that as progressive educators we have to learn to be able to structure educational activities for and with people. We do this in order that people themselves may experience praxis and become more free as a

result. If we think about the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ we see that freedom from autocracy was an abstract concept. Through their revolutionary activity they have made the abstract more possible. Now in praxis they must learn to build a new structure for their country.

In these university courses praxis is a core idea which pervades the whole purpose of the educational encounter. In educational work with groups we intend to explore experience as a source of the curriculum; in order to look for alternative understandings of experience; mutually challenge understandings of experience; and build new experiences through personal and collective activity. In teaching students this process the aim is for them to replicate it with groups they work for and with in communities outside the university. The aim is to enable communities of disadvantage to develop their own praxis in ways which widen the possibilities of action and thereby extend their freedom from the constraints of automaton conformity, authoritarianism and destructiveness. This focus on experience is intended to achieve, as Martin Buber, claims that ‘All real living is meeting’ (1958, p. 28) But in order to really meet people need to have the capacity to act freely and the aim of a radical popular education is to make this more possible.

Conclusion

Erich Fromm doesn’t simply leave us with a list of methods of escape from freedom he also adds what conditions might be required for the human being to embrace freedom. In these he includes:

Relatedness – care, love, relationships;

Transcendence- creativity, living beyond oneself;

Rootedness-developing a sense of belonging, place;

Sense of identity- living for others as well as ourselves;

Frame of Orientation- understanding the world and our place in it (Fromm, 1942).

All of these senses of freedom can be present in the four core themes of teaching popular education methodology. In exploring experience we place a central value on the relatedness of our curriculum to the real life issues of people. Through critical teaching we offer the potential to transcend common-sense understandings

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of experience. In dialogue we have the potential to create new senses of rootedness and identity as participants experience new ways of relating to one another and the world. Praxis offers the potential to build new frames of orientation through action and reflection on ways to change ourselves and the world we inhabit.

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