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Article abstract

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Finding Common Ground

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Ce texte se concentre sur le développement de l'éducation informelle et sa relation avec des traditions parallèles, notamment le travail auprès des jeunes, la formation continue, l'apprentissage informel et la pédagogie sociale. Une discussion est menée quant aux rapports tendus entre l'éducation formelle et informelle. Finalement, l'auteur prend en considération le rôle récent et contemporain de l'État par rapport au financement et au développement de l'éducation informelle.

Mots-clés : éducation informelle; financement public; Europe.

This text focuses on the development of informal education and its relationship with parallel traditions notably youth work, adult education, informal learning and social pedagogy. Some discussion will occur regarding the tensions between formal and informal education. Finally consideration will be given to the recent and contemporary role of the state in relation to the funding and development of informal education.

Keywords: informal education; public funding; Europe.

Este texto se concentra sobre el desarrollo de la educación informal y su relación con tradiciones paralelas, particularmente el trabajo para los jóvenes, la formación continúa, el aprendizaje informal y la pedagogía social. Una discusión es llevada en cuanto a las relaciones tensas entra la educación formal y informal. Finalmente, el autor tiene en cuenta el papel reciente y contemporáneo del Estado con relación a la financiación y con relación al desarrollo de la educación informal.

Palabras clave : educación informal; financiación pública; Europa.

Across Europe we encounter many forms of non-formal education and 'outreach' work occurring within community settings. Professionally those undertaking such work employ numerous terms to explain to others, and themselves, who they are and what they do. Social pedagogue, community worker, animateur, adult educator, youth worker, community educator, street worker, informal educator, foyer worker, community development worker and community organiser are just a few of the labels adopted. Each of those job titles, and others unlisted, speak of discrete histories that are of variable length and exclusivity. Equally all of them draw upon theoretical and intellectual traditions that have helped to sustain them whilst simultaneously providing a raison d'etre for their autonomous existence. Such variations are something we must for the foreseeable future accept as a given. Not least because one encounters little enthusiasm amongst practitioners for an abandonment of their existing niche and setting out on a search to find a new all-embracing professional classification or title - one that might be universally adopted.

One must not lightly brush away the variations but it is feasible to disinter attributes shared by all these groupings. First all are, to varying degrees, engaged in the process of education. Each seeks via different methods to help others extend their knowledge and understanding. Practitioners, whatever their specific designation, will given their desire to improve the lot of the fellow citizens and the communities they serve, unanimously believe in the transforming potential of education and the importance of helping themselves and others better understand the benefits of asking the why of things. Much as they will see as integral to their work the task of aiding those with whom they work to learn think with greater clarity as well as how to find and use information. Second although eager to share ideas and pass down skills and knowledge they predominately undertake this work outside of the venues of formal education – they teach but not in the classroom and lecture theatre. Instead they operate in settings where individuals and groups freely gather or in buildings where they arrange events and happenings that others voluntarily attend. This implies that whatever their chosen designation they are wholly or partly informal educators. "Informal" because they predominately work outside of the classrooms of the formal sector comprising schools and colleges. In venues that require they principally educate via the mediums of dialogue, conversation and the modelling of behaviour. Therefore although they possess ambitions and goals regarding what they seek to achieve, which some might label 'outcomes', what and how they educate is not determined by the constraints of either a curriculum or a syllabus. The point of commencement is the voluntary encounter initiated via the medium of conversation which, as Newman explained, is the 'medium of something more than an idle pleasure' for it is the 'very active agent in circulating and forming the opinions, tastes, and feelings of a whole people' (1931: 95). Conversations well managed will serve as an entree to association and dialogue it may therefore be viewed as a foundation-stone for an education fit for free men and women.

As noted at the outset much divides these cited occupations and professions one from another; for instance the:

- Age of the prime clientele;
- Locale of the work;
- Focus of the work;
- Degree of professional closure. In particular with regards to entry into their profession or vocation.

Also we must not forget that the professional titles are themselves contested, both internally and when they cross national and regional borders. Internally practitioners constantly dispute

what is and is not acceptable practice much as they question whether or not a given intervention falls within the purview of what they define as say community work or adult education. Equally the headings have acquired inconsistent meanings and foci in discrete localities. For example social pedagogy has come to mean something significantly different in the United Kingdom from the interpretation placed upon it in say Germany.

In the nineteenth century epidemiologists took infinite care compiling maps showing by locality where particular diseases were more, or less, prevalent. Likewise those researching poverty assembled maps to show the dispersal of distress. If such maps were to be assembled in relation to the distribution within Europe of the types of institutions we work in, for example, Folk High Schools, Community Centres, Youth Clubs, Social Centres, Foyers, etc. Or where given professions, for example, Street Worker, Animateur, Community Educator or Youth Minister are operating those maps would show narrow concentrations in specific localities alongside a nil or minimal presence elsewhere.

Noticeably forms of intervention which have thrived in some localities have failed to secure even a foothold elsewhere. An example of this has been the Folk High Schools. First established in Denmark during the 1840s, these spread rapidly outwards and by the close of the century approaching 150 were operating in Scandinavia (Rorodam, 1965). In addition a limited number were founded elsewhere in Europe, mostly in Germany, and by 1920 a dozen or so were to be found in the United States, predominately in the mid-west where immigrants from Scandinavia had settled. Despite their self-evident success and the degree to which influential educationalists from elsewhere celebrated their achievements (see for example Foght (1914); Sadler (1926); Lindeman (1926); and Haggard (1911)) the concept has never acquired serious momentum outside of the Nordic countries. Similar tales can be recounted with regards Settlements launched in Britain in 1882 but which grew even more rapidly in the United States during the following half century but failed to flourish in mainland Europe (Malleier, 2005; Johnson, 2001). Likewise the Cultural Centres found in France and Belgium; Foyers, Community Schools, Youth Centres and Street Work; and organisations such as the Catholic Workers Movement, YMCA, YWCA, the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides - all of which developed spasmodically and unevenly.

This pattern of uneven growth was not the result of either an absence of effort on the part of practitioners to disseminate or accessible knowledge of their achievements. For example we know that hundreds of visitors from Europe and the United States, including the future Czar of Russia, visited New Lanark in the decade after it was launched in 1814 to assess the merits of Robert Owen's educational experiment. To view at first hand his pioneering welfare programmes and appraise what were possibly both the original purpose-built community school and centre. Similarly awareness regarding the ground-breaking innovations of Pestalozzi, Fourier and Grundtvig was such that their ideas were widely discussed and debated throughout Europe and North America especially by those interested in educational reform and democratic alternatives to the then dominant models of practice. However such knowledge did not axiomatically ensure their schemes and ideas were adopted or embraced in all but a few settings.

Scant evidence exists that modes of informal educational practice can be readily transplanted from one setting or country to another unless deep and substantive commonalities already exist between these environments. In recent years British politicians have displayed a wretched weakness for 'buying-in' ready-made packages in relation to youth policy and the third-sector notably from the United States. Recently they have tried 'full-service' schools, mentoring programmes and

youth development all of which singularly failed to take root. Whilst from France Foyers were toyed with for a brief moment in time before being quietly erased from the agenda. Each arrived stripped of its history and no attempt was made by policy-makers, or, for that matter, practitioners to explain to themselves or others why these modes of intervention thrived in their lands of origin. It seems that as with the importation of fauna and flora we should be chary about introducing an 'alien' genus without assiduously assessing its suitability. Like the Cane Toads or Rabbits introduced to Australia acquiring 'off-the-shelf' policies may seem an attractive quick solution to an immediate problem but ultimately most either wither on the vine or prove more harmful to their host than the initial difficulty.

These failures and the existing diversity are not things we should necessarily regret or bemoan. For like the differentials in relation to welfare systems across Europe they reflect genuine variations in the political, social and religious make-up of the states and regions (Cousins, 2005; Epping-Andersen, 1990). Human affairs it must always be acknowledged are 'too complicated and difficult for any one kind of government to be universally practicable or desirable' (Gray, 2007: 126). The welfare state may have emerged as an integral expression of the logic of industrialisation and as a consequence of modernity but those forces were mediated in ways that ensured the appearance of different, one might even say incompatible, structures. Likewise the variable forms of informal education practice are dissimilar for equally sound reasons. In this case perhaps more than others because the 'family' of agencies and professions loosely amalgamated by a use of 'informal education' predominately operate within the sphere of civil society. Working with and alongside voluntary participants and predominately, it should be re-called, via the medium of conversation and dialogue freely entered into by both parties. The strength and vibrancy of such agencies therefore waxes and wanes as the relative strength and vitality of civil society itself will be re-configured over time. Opewrating in the here and now means progress can never be assumed or success guaranteed. Because they belong in and relate to civil society – this means that in a democracy they rely on an animated middle or "third" that is equipped to resist the intrusion of the state on one side and corporate capitalism on the other. Their independence therefore in large part relies on the existence of a civil society that is healthy and effervescent. It is the pool in which they swim – consequently if it is either polluted or evaporates they have nowhere else to go. For that reason professionals engaged in informal and community education have to help protect those waters from unwarranted incursions by the state and capital alike. This is not a struggle that can yield an ultimate victory but one that demands unceasing vigilance. For history shows, much to the chagrin of many naive practitioners, that our modes of intervention are of themselves politically and ethically neutral; which means that like formal education and social work these can be employed to great effect by others who seek to achieve outcomes that most practitioners would not endorse. Indeed both the state and capital constantly seek to incorporate these modes of practice to achieve their own ends. These dangers should not be exaggerated and a sense of balance within the context of our liberal democracy is required if practitioners are to avoid attracting ridicule for being unduly alarmist. However, as for example, Sunker and Otto (1997) with reference to social pedagogy, Schmurr (1997) with regards to social work and Kelly (2007) and Becker (1946) in relation to youth work show these modes of intervention can, with at most minimal adaptation, be employed to secure anti-democratic and oppressive ends. Similar tales can equally be recounted in relation to community work and community development. Therefore it is important to keep in mind the counsel of Freire that the strategies of 'education', both formal and informal, can with equal facility serve the causes of 'oppression' as they can of 'liberation'.

If we can agree, and it is a big if, that the locale of our practice as educators lies predominately within the sphere of civil society then perhaps we can begin to unearth what it might be that unites, rather than divides us as a family of professionals and professions. To recognise that although we may be starting from different sides we are all as educators endeavouring to climb the same mountain. To this end I would wish to propose that although within this family of professions our immediate histories might be varied and dissimilar we share a history that unites us. First we possess a common origin which can be traced back to the Athenian Agora: a special place where Athenians engaged in one of their favourite pastime – lively animated discussion. Such debate and discussion was not a distraction or amusement, although it was frequently playful and awash with raillery, rather it lay at heart of a social and political system founded upon the engagement of all the citizenry; for as Pericles explained "we differ from other states in regarding the man who holds aloof from public life as useless" (Thucydides, 1998: 72). Here was not only a place of association and conviviality, but above all else the locale where democracy lived. That Athenian model has provided the tap root for much contemporary practice; which has tended to place great emphasis on mutual learning via conversation and dialogue, and has frequently opted for direct rather representative democracy as a modus operandi. However it must be recognised that the Athenian model of democracy was short-lived and to all intents and purposes hidden from view until revived in the small towns of New England over 1,500 years after it ended in Athens. An absence that embodied a warning that still resonates; namely that democracy once gained can be lost or squandered. Freedom it seems, as Oakshott (1991) explained, is not an ideal that can be slickly exported but a practice that grows up in particular historical circumstances. Yet Athenian democracy, even when denied the environment in which it might flourish, remained an inspiration for those who prized freedom. Although according to Habermas (1989) it was not until the turn of the eighteenth century that anything akin to the Agora, surfaced this time in the coffeehouses of England. What made these places unique was that they created what Habermas called a 'public sphere' where men and women from various walks of life might discuss politics, cultural matters and ideas without fear of arrest or harassment. To their supporters and habitue these were 'penny universities', venues where people might debate, discuss and share the 'dangerous' ideas that toppled princes and shook the foundations of science. To their enemies however they were "seminaries of sedition" (Miller, 2006).

If the tap root goes deep down to the Athenian tradition, the town meetings of New England and the 'public sphere' of the eighteenth century, the surface roots are to be found nearer to hand. In the clubs, associations, adult education programmes, study circles and social pedagogy of the early nineteenth century. Many of which sought to re-create free open spaces wherein unfettered dialogue and conversation thrived, and the coinage of ideas might be freely exchanged. Created by individuals who shared Grundtvig's desire to let the 'winged word' take flight and believed like Newman (1931: 71) that "truth is wrought by many minds working freely together" these projects and programmes like our existing formal education system, the modern university, the technical school and social work emerged along with industrialisation and urbanisation. Arriving in the wake of the steam locomotive, factory system, trade unions and mass political parties they were not like the bulk of formal education predominately designed to service the needs of industry and landowners. Rather they were under-pinned by a belief, shared by John Stuart Mill, that "The idea is essentially repulsive, of a society held together only by the relations and feelings arising out of pecuniary interest" (1929: 742). Here was but one example of a counter-cultural analysis that inspired not merely a different curriculum but a search that continues into the present for alternative methods to didactic instruction and routinised learning. This pursuit

of democratic pedagogies able, of themselves, to strengthen civil society by fostering engagement and participation via conversion, dialogue and association grew alongside modern democracy itself for each sustained the other. Hence what we might view as a discrete tradition is barely two centuries old and in most cases half that. It is worth reminding ourselves that for example the concept of a Foyer is less than a century old; the youth club barely seventy years; the social and community centre maybe a hundred years in the making; community development just over half a century; community organising probably just a ninety year presence;, and the outdoor pursuits centre maybe eighty years. Professional training as an entity in relation to each of these is always an even more recent arrival.

Initially many of these modes of working were experiments created by organisations that had narrow ambitions seeking only to manage the behaviour of the 'socially deviant' or convert members of the emerging working class to a particular religious belief. But they nevertheless modelled key elements of a mode of working much of which could be appropriated by those wedded to a liberal education tradition. For however reactionary the ambitions of the agency the relationship between the 'provider' and the 'user' was essentially a voluntary one, and the means of communication employed were conversational and associational. If these methods were to be appropriated by emancipatory projects then the practitioners and the agency were obligated to embody the values they sought to impart; to function as a metonymy which served as an exemplary of the ideals of human life as a whole. Unlike the training and instructional model motivated by a desire to ensure the individual 'fits' more efficiently into their allotted place in the world as it exists, this informal version of liberal education was, and is, founded upon a melioristic belief in the capacity of men and women to improve their world. Dialogue, conversation and critical analysis are not, within these settings, mere affectations but the essentials needed to build democracy anew and foster meaningful citizenship. Equally the trust, mutuality and interdependence essential for civil society to thrive were features of so much early informal education because that was 'their' purpose. For here was a model based on a belief that democracy could not be learnt in the formal sector rather that if it was to prosper it must become as de Tocqueville noted a 'habit of the heart' (1988: 287). Hence the need then, and now, for a dynamic informal sector committed to social justice and equality. Those pioneering informal educational programmes and agencies emerged at a time when the struggles for democracy and emancipation were also burgeoning. They were therefore partners in a great enterprise. Moreover besides their formal and informal educational roles in very many instances these agencies provided welfare services such as access to health care and income support which were designed to alleviate poverty and suffering in an era when the modern welfare state was not in existence.

By fits and starts the environment has altered to the detriment of many agencies. First state welfare has slowly usurped the role of the informal education agencies in relation to the alleviation of poverty and the provision of services. Second the appearance of state sponsored social casework agencies has supplanted much of the individual counselling and support work once picked up by the agencies. Third the expansion of state school provision and the more recent arrival of mass higher and post-school education has further marginalised many agencies. Partly because schools and universities provide leisure facilities and opportunities for young people that previously could only be found in the voluntary sector. But also because they have 'skilled-up' individuals; thereby enabling them to unearth their own independent routes to adult and social education. Finally the rise of home entertainment and more recently heightened access to computers has encouraged increasing privatisation which has exacerbated the rate of decline. Consequently informal education's pioneering role appears to have ended. Before the end of the 1960s many

of the early forms of provision were fast disappearing. Settlements, community centres, youth clubs, uniformed youth organisations, adult education centres and others despite heightened state support in many localities and the growing professionalization of the workforce were in retreat.

Does this family of informal education professions have a viable future? Growing individuation has undoubtedly contributed to the widespread collapse of the old politics of left and right and the diminished presence of social institutions such as the churches and trade unions that once bound us together and helped us make sense of the world and our place within it. For example within the political sphere we have witnessed since the 1980s in Europe a steady unbroken decline in the membership of political parties. In France and Britain the percentage of the population belonging to a political party is now below 2 per cent. In every European country except Portugal, Greece and Spain a similar hollowing out, accompanied by declining participation in elections has taken place (Mair, 2006). This has legitimised the appearance of, according to Pitkin of

> a self-perpetuating elite that rules – or rather administers – passive or privatized masses of people.... professionals entrenched in office and in party structures. Immersed in a distinct culture of their own, surrounded by other specialists and insulated from the ordinary realities of constituents' lives, they live not just physically but also mentally 'inside the beltway' (2004: 339).

Habermas (2013; 2013a) describes this as a 'post democratic executive feudalism' in which political leaders and unelected functionaries gather to broker 'down deals' unhindered by meaningful democratic accountability. Citizens it appears are turning from participants to spectators. Creating what Putman (2001) calls a political malaise mirrored in a wider withdrawal from the community that brings with it a weakening of civil society. Or what Pope Francis described as the emergence of a "globalised culture of indifference" (Pope Francis, 2013). The Judt is similarly pessimistic. Highlighting the rapid de-mutualisation of so much of our lives with services being transferred from publically owned agencies and accountable providers to private for-profit suppliers; as a consequence:

> people who live in private spaces contribute actively to the dilution and corrosion of public space ....If public goods – public services, public spaces, public facilities – are devalued, diminished in the eyes of citizens and replaced by private services available against cash, then we lose the sense that common interests and common needs ought to trump private preferences and individual advantage. And once we cease to value the public over the private, surely we shall come in time to have difficulty seeing just why we should value law (the public good par excellence) over force. (Judt, 2010: 129)

Isolated voices of optimism counter these pessimistic viewpoints (Donald, 2008) but overwhelmingly the weight of empirical evidence and the assessments of commentators combine to suggest that we should be fearful regarding the well-being of civil social and the public sphere. Therefore informal educators and others should pay due attention to securing its survival, and acknowledge that we may be living in a time when the tide is flowing in the wrong direction.

The hollowing out of politics is only one among many challenges we face. Three others should be briefly mentioned. First is the extent to which capitalism and a crude version of possessive individualism has buried itself deep into our collective and individual psyches. The consumerisation of our daily lives and the unremitting re-configuration of the individual as a consumer, rather than as a citizen, has enabled the 'market' as metaphor coming to dominate public debate and increasingly private conversation. Second is the growing privatization of public space and the rise of class segregated and gated communities (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Minton, 2013; Glaze, Webster and Frantz, 2011). Which has contributed to asymmetrical living and a view that: "public space-the

space occupied by the public- is now regularly seen as a threatening rather than a socialising arena" (Williams, 2008:54). Indeed the absence of people, notably young people from public space is now judged by one British government audit as a key signifier of a good place to live (Parkinson et al, 2006: 167). The third is the shift to a world of horizontal relationships, linked and driven by social media and the internet; one wherein individuals can acquire multiple identities and belong to varying degrees to myriad groups and if desired limitless causes. It is world where according to Turkle (2013) people become 'alone together ... a tribe of one'. Networks and linkages that may well be fuelling 'epistemic closure' that curtails meaningful debate by allowing individuals to acquire information and ideas solely from those sources that match their existing belief systems (Cohen, 2010). Soon these networks will come to revolutionise production via digital fabrication which will lead to the widespread 'individualisation' of production (Gershenfeld, 2012). A pre-eminent problem is that the internet and social media are not a new 'commons', 'public sphere' or segment of civil society. Facebook, Google and their like are owned by companies driven by a desire to maximise profit not foster democracy and they therefore do not offer a re-vamped version of the Agora.

The optimistic view is that although each of the aforementioned pose real difficulties for us as professionals they are merely re-configurations of earlier challenges. After all were not settlements created because as Beveridge (1904) noted so that "no man can really be a good citizen who goes through life in a watertight compartment of his own class". Likewise do not struggles to create 'public spheres' and 'commons' have a long history? Did not Addison say of the coffee-houses and publications of that special period that

> It is said of Socrates that he brought Philosophy down from Heaven, to inhabit among Men: and I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies. (quoted Miller, 2006: 45)

And have not fears regarding the imminent demise of conversation have been circulating for many centuries? For Hazlitt described the fashionable conversation of the early nineteenth century as 'flat, insipid, stale, and unprofitable .... Persons in high life talk almost entirely by rote ... The fear of giving offence destroys sincerity there can be no true enjoyment of society, nor unfettered exertion of intellectual activity" (1820: 28). Indeed we are correct to be ever conscious that each of these and other challenges are unlikely to be in every sense new and fresh. Also we should be ever sensitive to the reality that our professional field has always experienced decline and renewal. However equally we must be alert to the fact that it would be naive to assume that renewal is either easily achieved or inevitable. The erosion of the commons and the public sphere, growing individualisation and de-mutualisation as well as the arrival of Turkle's 'tribes of one' throw up challenges that may defeat us. In the meantime we need to urgently create new ways of holding conversations regarding values and education. To foster fresh ways of generating what Mill called "spontaneous education" and "collective deliberation on questions of common interest" (1929: 757). That means recognising that community is under threat and that means using traditional as well as finding new ways to build and strengthen it. As Parker J Palmer puts it, we must encourage "all to become to become gardeners of community if we want democracy to flourish" (2013). The challenges are surely not insurmountable but we will need focus as a family of professions on our historic roles of fostering association and bringing people together in order to foster conversation and dialogue. Our professions can and should, as before, play a part in building civil society and nurturing democracy and fraternity. In opposing the infiltration of the state and above all capital into the public sphere; the difficulty is that we may find ourselves undertaking that work in a less congenial climate than in the recent past. What is certain is that the terrain is changing and therefore we will be required to develop new ways of initiating conversations and dialogue with our fellow citizens.

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