

## SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

*the ability to work constructively within and between social groups to create more resilient and sustainable communities*

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### **Introduction**

In a world of diminishing resources, climate instability, and increased globalisation, the temptation to retreat into 'like' groups in the competition for survival has the potential to generate increased conflict and escalating violence. The inability to see the world from the vantage point of others is a key factor behind both local and civil conflict. It can also lead to less violent but equally harmful problems of alienation, marginalisation and exclusion. We develop our identity by defining ourselves in relation to like and unlike groups but this can quickly lead to assumptions and stereotyping as people struggle to make sense of who they are. Understanding how identity categories are created and how labels can be used to situate people as insiders or outsiders is important in creating more resilient and sustainable communities.

Many people in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain grow up with little personal knowledge of difference. There is limited close contact between different class, dis/ability and ethnic groups and they tend to gravitate towards 'like' circles of friends. Although learners may have covered citizenship at school, citizenship education rarely includes any personal reflection or experiential learning and may not implement democratic classroom practices. Learners talk **about** difference and equalities in a multicultural world, but with limited direct experience of the range of people that make up any community, they may not have the emotional literacy or the skills to deal with it. Building equal relationships, and finding commonality with those where this is not immediately obvious, requires a level of personal confidence that learners can only develop for themselves. Merrifield, in research carried out on 'learning citizenship', concluded that '*civic education framed in terms of knowledge and perhaps values but without an experiential component has little impact on behaviour*'. (Merrifield 2002)

Putnam's model of social capital (the building of social networks and community relationships) is useful for discussing the experience of living in a factionalised community (2000). His extensive study of American society at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century identifies a growing sense of fear and isolation and the demise of trust, support and belonging. He sees the development of social networks as important to the well being of individuals and groups and differentiates between the notion of bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding involves reciprocal relationships between known groups that grow out of doing things for people you know will do things for you in return. But by focusing on similarities and facilitating inclusion, this can reinforce divisions between identity groups. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, involves reciprocal relationships between unlike groups, doing things for people you do not necessarily know, and a more generalised reciprocity. It stems from the

belief that contributing more broadly to a trustful and giving society will eventually benefit us all. Beem (1999) describes the importance of trust and the role of interpersonal relationships between unlike peoples:

Trust between individuals thus becomes trust between strangers and trust of a broad fabric of social institutions; ultimately, it becomes a shared set of values, virtues, and expectations within society as a whole. Without this interaction... trust decays; at a certain point, this decay begins to manifest itself in serious social problems... The concept of social capital contends that building or rebuilding community and trust requires face-to-face encounters. (Beem 1999: 20)

Creating sustainable, resilient communities along the lines of the Transition Town Movement (Hopkins 2008) requires skills in working with and getting on well with local people from diverse backgrounds, demanding a certain degree of bridging social capital. The security of any local community also depends on establishing and maintaining good links with other surrounding communities, and the ability to deal with difference.

### **Community Engagement and Difference**

Models of community engagement, where learners undertake part of their learning through active practical projects with or on behalf of a local community group, can offer important personal and professional learning. Learners also provide a rich resource for local community projects. Projects where learners work with a particular group to produce something together, either for the benefit of that group or for a third organisation, provide scope for building interpersonal relationships and utilising different forms of knowledge. When working well, they offer the opportunity for people who might not otherwise meet to build relationships and develop a sense of trust. When encountering difficulties, they encourage patience and negotiation to deal with challenging situations.

There is huge transformational potential in, for example: a) sixth formers staffing a holiday activity in natural surroundings for children from inner-city groups, b) older people working with occupational therapy students to teach them lost craft skills, c) environmental students working with ex-offenders to carry out a wetlands survey, or d) permaculture students building a community garden with and for a group of learning-disabled adults.

Working with and for marginalised groups provides an insight into their world and brings a different perspective to a shared task. It necessitates a negotiated approach to joint working and requires individuals to listen to each other and suspend or check out their assumptions. It brings together academic and experiential knowledge to solve a particular problem. Learners develop their own values and attitudes, as well as their practical skills, in relation to a real- and policy-oriented environment within their discipline area.

But to work well, an engagement programme needs to: a) identify projects that students can comfortably undertake and that the local community needs, b) match students with projects that reflect their interests and skills, c) keep projects

manageable, d) ensure learners are active and have sufficient responsibility but remain safe, e) provide opportunities for people to develop real and equal relationships with each other, and f) ensure that the project is contributing to creating resilient and sustainable communities.

### **Activity**

Learners could be partnered with relevant organisations and required to undertake a specified number of community-based hours. This would necessitate careful management. Some programmes encourage learners to find their own opportunities by following up personal contacts or applying for volunteering positions through existing local channels. While this requires them to be pro-active, many will limit their opportunities by choosing groups they already know. A matching event – whereby the educational institution builds contacts with partner organisations, asks them to formulate projects of relevant lengths and come into the institution to recruit students – helps build longer-term partnerships in which projects work for both sides. Keeping a localised database of project opportunities, liaising with partners over their needs and requirements, and supporting learners in choosing an activity helps ensure successful learning.

### **The Dangers of Patronage**

Many universities and colleges have Service Learning Programmes, and similar initiatives are being introduced into secondary schools, whereby students are asked to undertake a period of volunteering or ‘service to’ their local community as part of their accredited studies. The danger of these programmes is in the welfare approach they suggest towards disadvantage and marginalisation that reinforces a labelling mentality. Unless learners properly understand the value of other forms of knowledge and experience, they will see themselves as ‘haves’ giving to ‘have nots’. If active engagement programmes are to benefit learners and those they are working alongside, they need to be based on a social justice rather than a social service approach to learning and action. Social justice, equality and respect for minorities are crucial elements of any sustainable future.

### **A rights-based rather than a welfare approach to partnership**

A rights-based project focuses on two groups working together as equals who bring varying skills to a particular task, recognising the range of learning that each brings. An example of this might be working with, rather than for, learning-disabled adults and implementing permaculture principles into the design of a community garden. A welfare approach involves one or more partners providing a service to the other. An example of this might be using landscape architecture students to design a garden for local community use. The rights-based project integrates the perspectives of the users as well as the design skills of students. It is more likely to create something that is fit for purpose than one designed by students working alone.

An ethos of ‘mutual benefit’ draws attention to the learning that students gain from partners as well as the skills they offer. Pairing community members, who bring contextual experience and practical skills, with learners, who bring cognitive and

academic skills, illustrates the value of different forms of knowledge. As well as building understanding across the “ability divide”, it often means the task developed together is more comprehensive than either participant could develop alone.

### **Real ways to evaluate practical experience**

Programmes built around transcending difference and working with community practitioners are often required to evaluate personal and/or local change. Assessing learners on the learning they have gained from a particular activity rather than their performance on it encourages them to interrogate their own attitudes and values, looking more deeply into their significance. It also allows learners to do well on a course where there may have been practical difficulties outside of their own making. But they will need to be introduced to processes of reflection and reflective writing. The difference between describing particular events or impressions of others and reflecting deeply on them needs to be incorporated into the early stages of a course. In an academic context that has not traditionally dealt with personal experience, this may seem unfamiliar terrain. Learners may struggle with the different requirements of reflective writing and these should be made explicit if they are part of the assessment.

### **Activity**

A first activity could include getting learners to ‘step inside the shoes’ of someone from a very different background (perhaps one of the individuals they will be working with) and then describe themselves ‘from the outside’, considering the assumptions a partner might make about them. Structured learning “logs”, which suggest questions for learners to reflect on as they approach and work on their community project, help to direct their thinking and make the issues of equality and difference explicit. The logs also encourage learners to explore their own reactions and to be honest about their fears and frustrations as well as their successes. Reflective activities encourage learners to think about the process they were involved in as well as the product they produced. They help them to identify their own internal values, think about how they may appear to others and raise awareness of ways in which they may stereotype other people.

Other practical tasks (such as designing an evaluation of the project undertaken, writing guidance leaflets for volunteers working in the same organisation, or critiquing the product they produced together) may go some way to evaluating practical change.

In general, the lifestyle drivers of the last half century have, increasingly, promoted choice, self interest and the predominant market forces at the expense of social cohesion. A more sustainable lifestyle will require the ability to work with others from diverse backgrounds to build resilient, sustainable and equitable communities for the future.

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