

LEARNING FOR EMPLOYABILITY? IDEAS TO REASSERT A CRITICAL EDUCATION PRACTICE IN COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the cause and effects of the increased policy emphasis on work to support employability within the field of Adult and Community Education in Scotland. This exploration is conducted from a critical perspective to demonstrate how Neo-liberalism and New Managerialism are reshaping the purpose and practice of Adult and Community Education and shifting its emphasis from “learning to be” to “learning to earn”. The way employability work is conceptualised will be critically examined to reveal how it can cut across what are perceived to be some of the core values and ethical commitments of Community Education such as empowerment, dialogue, and social constructivist approaches to knowledge and curriculum development. The concepts of hegemony and governmentality will be drawn on to reveal how practitioners are being shaped and disciplined by these neo liberal times and the accompanying technical rationality, potentially resulting in the contradictory situation in which practitioners become answerable to two masters, one representing the logic of the market, and the other, the values and ethics of the profession. So we shall conclude by arguing that Community and Adult educators need to develop a critical awareness of the effects of neo liberalism on education policy and practice so they can help people become aware of their agency and encourage their active contribute to the transformation of their social world based on their own interests, rather than working to adapt people to fit passively and uncritically into this existing unequal one.

KEY WORDS: Neo Liberalism, New managerialism, Employability, Hegemony, Governemtality, Community & Adult Education

Introduction

“Mechanics” Institutes...offer classes in the brand of political economy which takes free competition as its God. The teachers of this subject preach the doctrine that it does not lie within the power of the workers to change the existing economic order...they must resign themselves to starving without making

a fuss. The students are taught subservience to the existing political and social order". (Engels, quoted in Fieldhouse 1999, 27)

Mechanics Institutes in the UK were a remarkable 19th century innovation in education for working people, but these institutions were not designed to elevate the critical consciousness of workers. On one side were those who saw education as being primarily about providing workers with the appropriate skills and attitudes to serve the needs of the economy. On the other were those who saw this type of education as domesticating people into an exploitative socio-economic situation. This education provided "merely useful knowledge" which might benefit people personally and pragmatically. However, for collective change people wanted "really useful knowledge", that which would help people understand their current situation and raise awareness of how they could act to change it for the better. (Johnson, 1992) It is the argument of this article that adult and community educators have to be reflexively aware of how policy positions them and the assumptions it embodies because educators can be a resource for people or, potentially, a problem for them.

This historical debate on useful and really useful knowledge has some resonance with today as employability, learning the skills for work, has emerged as a key policy priority for lifelong and community education in the UK. During the 1980s and 1990s the focus for educational intervention was on unemployment but this has now been superseded by a focus on the subjectivity of the unemployed. For some (Biesta, 2006a) this is problematic, as it narrows down the purpose of education to serving the needs of the economy, resulting in a shift from "learning to be" to "learning to earn". This realignment in priorities is happening within a new managerialist paradigm, which utilises business and free market "policy technologies" (Ball, 2003, Martin, 2008) to evidence efficiency, quality and performance in public services. Alternatively, some writers (Crowther 2012, Lynch et al 2012) claim these "technologies" create a "regime of truth"; a powerful discourse by which a government can exercise influence over professionals to alter their "subjectivities" and ensure its policy aims are met (Lemke 2001). The mainspring of this realignment is the result of the "hegemony of neo-liberalism" (Crowther 2004, Olsen & Peters 2005).

The above trend has profound implications for educators as they are shaped and disciplined by a neo-liberal hegemony which has become commonsense and therefore beyond question. Without critical reflection on these issues, educators may ultimately be complicit in delivering to the people they work with a modern version of "merely useful knowledge" which appears to offer some sense of personal empowerment whilst, at the same time,

collectively subjugates people. Therefore in this article we will critically explore some of the claimed transformational affects neo-liberalism has had on the purpose and practice of education by using the example of employability. The structure of the article is as follows; we begin by defining employability and discussing the concept's contested nature and then set this in a Scottish policy context. Neoliberalism will then be defined and its dominance and operation will be explored by drawing on two critical theoretical ideas, hegemony and governmentality. Finally we conclude by exploring some of the problems raised by the impact of neo-liberalism on education with reference to post 16 educational provision in Scotland.

Employability: the Scottish Policy Context

According to McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) the concept of employability has become an important policy discourse in the UK and internationally. This is partly the result of a significant shift in the nature of the UK economy over the last thirty years, with a relative decline in manufacturing and a growth in information technology, financial and service industries. This implies a different set of skills are now required for employment, so called soft or technical skills such as problem solving, the use of information and communication technologies, communication and customer service. (Sissons & Jones 2012). Of course a focus on employability, rather than unemployment, can easily shift attention away from significant issues like poverty, which might be part of the reason for unemployment in the first place. For some the current importance of employability is partly the result of the dominance of a policy focus on human capital theory (see Lloyd & Payne 2004 p, 207 or Coffield 2000, p 8), which rest on some key questionable assumptions. For example, that the prosperity and welfare of individuals, economic growth and the competitive advantage of national economies relies on people's individual skills or human capital. This assumption also emphasises an individual responsibility to continually learn and update the appropriate knowledge and skills needed to enhance employability and thus help individuals to actively participate in the labour market and the "knowledge driven economy" (See also, Crowther 2004, Brown et al, 2006 or Wolf et al 2006). In addition focusing on individual skills development also has a wider significance for the economy, for example as Lloyd and Payne (2002) claim, policy makers see this as, "the answer to a whole host of economic and social problems" including productivity, unemployment and social exclusion (p, 365). Furthermore another assumption suggests that, to promote and sustain a productive and competitive economy, the education sector should be more aware of and aligned to the needs of employers. In relation to the UK, Coffield (1999) refers to these assumptions as a

“powerful consensus” dominating not only the educational agenda but also economic, social and political ones too.

At a basic level employability appears to refer to the human skills and attitudes compatible with work (Westwood 2004, p. 46). McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) consider a simple definition inadequate and discuss the tensions inherent in grappling with its meaning. They suggest that employers see employability mainly as a trait of the individual whilst other definitions reflect the impact of both individual characteristics and labour market conditions (p 199); that is personal characteristics and the structure of opportunities. Brown et al (2003) suggest that the dominant definition is based on simplistic and flawed assumptions about human capital theory. This definition over emphasises the role of individual skills and knowledge and underplays structural issues and failures in the economy. They argue that much of the literature and policy debate overlooks the idea of the “duality of employability” which they claim has both “absolute and “relative” dimensions. The absolute dimension relates to individual capacities, whilst the relative dimension relates to the complex interplay of the supply and demand of labour, and which lies beyond the control of the individual, no matter what their capacities are. For Brown et al, “employability, cannot, therefore be defined solely on individual characteristics” (p. 110).

Employability features significantly in the Scottish policy context and is a key element of the Government’s strategy to tackle unemployment and grow a strong and sustainable economy (see Scottish Government, 2012a). In pursuing this strategy, the Government has established an employability framework of policy initiatives that encourage cross-sectorial and multi agency partnerships which aim to promote and improve employability. The education sector, including adult and community education, is recognised as important to this agenda and a range of policy initiatives set out how this sector can contribute, for example by an increased emphasis on employability work and through developing partnerships with schools and other agencies. (See for example Scottish Executive, 2006, or Scottish Government, 2012a).

Nevertheless, the Scottish government’s conception of employability is open to criticism as it seems to reflect what Lloyd & Payne (2004) describe as a “simplistic human capital theory”, which places a greater emphasis on the “absolute” definition of individual skills development and it underplays or ignores the “duality of employability”. It also prioritises the economic purpose of education and assumes that “merely useful knowledge” is what is required for empowering learners. The following selected quotes help support this claim. For example, the definition used is, “...all the things that enable people to increase their chances of getting a job, staying in a job, and progressing further in work” (Scottish Government, n.d.). Moreover they state;

"A skilled, educated and creative workforce is essential to our goal of delivering faster sustainable economic growth with opportunities for all to flourish". (Scottish Government 2012b, p. 11). In the most recent post-16 educational policy document *Putting Learners at the Centre*, they claim "In Scotland, as elsewhere, an increasingly competitive global economy demands our people develop new and different skills" (Scottish Government 2011, p. 4) and therefore the government stresses the need to "improve the mechanisms for employers to influence the post-16 system" (Scottish Government 2012b, p. 9). Importantly in relation to the purpose of education the Government is clear,

"...its primary purpose is to achieve sustainable economic growth. We believe that should be the underlying theme of our reforms for post - 16 education, since a high performing education and skills system is an essential component of building the workforce...clearly there are other purposes to education, but we must recognise the difficult economic circumstances we face". (Scottish Government 2011, p. 6).

The government's conception of employability therefore seems to be consistent with Coffield's (1999) "powerful consensus", which links people's individual skills development to their own and their nations economic competitiveness and prosperity. It also reflects one of the central tenets of this "powerful consensus" in that education becomes "a mere instrument of the economy" (1999, p. 480). Therefore the purpose of post-16 education promoted by the Scottish Government is a limited one. According to Crowther (2012), it is an impoverished version seen as "merely acquiring the skills for the job market" and a preoccupation with the deficiencies of the individual, with the role of policy to promote and encourage their skills development. For Brown et al (2003, p. 10) conceiving of employability like this is "the classic example of blaming the victim".

Even in difficult economic times this is a problematic way to conceptualise the purpose of education. For example Aspin & Chapman (2000) argue that education has a "triadic nature" incorporating three elements. One is an economic purpose for employability, economic growth and prosperity, yet they also stress two other important elements. One is a personal element, which relates to an individual's personal development and growth and the other is a democratic element, which relates to the promotion of social inclusiveness, democratic understanding, and to encourage activity which will help develop and sustain a "more democratic polity and set of social institutions" (p. 17). The key for Aspin and Chapman however is that these elements are interrelated and indivisible, with a "complex interplay between all three" (p. 16). Highlighting the economic imperative at the expense of the other two

simply reflects an educational system out of balance with the broader needs of individuals and collectivities.

Biesta (2006a) and Crowther (2004) argue that there has been a significant realignment in both the priorities and understandings of this triad over the last three decades. They highlight a key report by Faure (1972) titled "Learning to be" which, although contested, helped define the debate at that time. Then the focus of debate was on lifelong "education" in order to promote solidarity and democracy, which would then contribute to the "good society" and be focused on developing people's lives in the full. Crowther (2004) highlights the subtle, yet profound, transformation of the language and meaning in the current policy discourse, where lifelong "education" embodying the ideas of "learning to be" aimed at developing full, rounded humans and a socially just society, has been transformed into lifelong "learning", focused on the individual development of human capital, employability and the subservience of education to needs of the economy. Biesta (2006a, p. 171) captures this transformation as from "learning to be" to "learning to be productive and employable".

Neo-liberalism, Hegemony and Governmentality

What is the nature of this "economic imperative" and how can we explain the shift from "learning to be" to learning to earn? Many see this economic imperative as the result of the domination of the political economy of neo-liberalism and its influence on international and national public policy discourses. Some see neo-liberalism's influence as significant and transformational, particularly in relation to its impact on education and other public services. For Garret (2009, p. 27) neo-liberalism is the "back story" that explains some of the key changes taking place in public services. Many writers remark on the difficulties involved in defining and analysing neo-liberalism precisely (Gamble 2001, Davies & Barnes, 2007, Ball 2012). Nonetheless there are some core ideas and concepts that help explain its emergence and key features.

Neo-liberalism emerged in the 1970s in the UK partly as a result of the breakdown of the Keynesian, social democratic consensus and partly as its gravedigger. This consensus had a number of key characteristics. For example; a mixed economy of a free market but with significant state intervention through the nationalisation of key industries; a commitment to full employment, the building of a welfare state and national health service. It also included a settlement between capital and labour recognising that that Trade Unions had a legitimate role in the economy and society. The 1979 election of Thatcher's Conservative Party brought this consensus to an end. Her government began the process of introducing neo-liberal ideas as the solution to the

problems caused by this consensus and by the end of the 1980s it had become “the dominant common sense, the paradigm shaping all policies” (Gamble 2001, 129): in Margaret Thatcher’s famous dictum “there is no alternative”.

So what is neo-liberalism? For Harvey (2005) it is best understood by thinking about it politically rather than as a set of economic principles somehow above politics. Its aim is to focus on freeing corporate interests and capitalism from the constraints of the social democratic consensus and so neo-liberalism is;

... a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (P2)

Building on this definition and in general, neo-liberalism is thought to have a number of distinctive features (See Gamble 2001, Martin 1992, Latham 2011, Wiggan 2012, Bourdieu & Wacquant 2001). Influenced by the work and ideas of economists such as Friedrich Von Hayek and Milton Friedman, neo-liberalism is an updated version of classical liberalism or market fundamentalism (Heywood, 2012) which involves the advancement of the free market as the most efficient and morally superior way to distribute resources; it supports the promotion of the “possessive”, self-interested individual, driven by the profit motive and free to choose in a marketised milieu. It strives for reductions in public expenditure and the rolling back of the state’s involvement in the society and the economy, particularly through the privatisation of nationalised industries. It also involves the introduction of business or market principles to the operation of public services and the creation of deregulated and flexible labour markets, including the marginalisation of trade unions and the limiting of their power. Neo-liberalism involves a reform of welfare. This relates not only to the refocusing of budgets with an aim to reduce public spending and an assessment of the consequences of this spending on the economy and labour market, but also a shift in the balance of responsibility for welfare to the individual to encouraging a move from state dependency to self-reliance.

The nature, role and scope of the neo-liberal state are significant. Its involvement in society should be minimal, and as Harvey (2005) points out, its role is to “create and preserve an institutional framework” to support and sustain a thriving free market. This view of the state and its relationship to individuals and society is influenced heavily by the ideas of thinkers such as Robert Nozick (See Giroux, 2004, or Thorsen & Lie 2006). For example according to Nozick, individuals have immutable rights and a just society is one which protects

and promotes these rights and people's ability to exercise them without interference, particularly from the intrusion of the state. He argues that, "So strong and far reaching are these rights that they raise questions of what, if anything the state and its officials can do" (Nozick 1974, p ix). However, whilst rhetorically neo-liberalism stresses the aim of "rolling back" the state, some writers argue that the state under neo-liberalism, rather than being rolled back is having its character and core functions radically redrawn (Garret 2009, p. 16). The neo-liberal state can only be legitimate if it is committed to deregulation, privatisation and the expansion of the free market. It cannot do this if it is small or weak, but rather it needs to be a strong state that will act to challenge any groups or vested interests, which may seek to hamper or distort the operation of the free market. (Gamble 2001, p. 131). As Brenner & Theodore (2002, p. 5) argue;

"...while neo-liberalism aspires to create a "utopia" of free markets liberated from all forms of state interference, it has in practice entailed a dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state interference in order to impose market rules on all aspects of social life"

So neo-liberalism represents a "paradigm shift" in the focus and priorities of economic, political and social policies. One of its key aims (Martin 1992, p. 29) has been the "remoralisation" of society, to change the way people think about the state and society, from the perspective and relationships that defined the previous social democratic consensus, to ones which encourage people to think and act in ways that relate to the free market. To see themselves as free individuals, sovereign consumers, who judge for themselves what is in their best interests and not the "nanny" state. Furthermore according to this paradigm, and reflecting the ideas of Hayek and Nozick, individuals therefore make free choices and decisions about their lives. As Thorsen & Lie (2006, p 15) argue, "instances of inequality and glaring social injustice are morally acceptable, at least to the degree in which they could be seen as the result of freely made decisions" and the state has no legitimate role in correcting these circumstances. Yet in relation to education there is strong evidence to take a more critical view, which questions the veracity and outcome of these ideas. For example, it is assumed that markets are free and neutral and automatically work in the best interests of consumers and the subsequent distribution of resources is right and just. For example according to Nozick (1974, p. 149-150);

"What each person gets he gets from others who give to him in exchange for something, or as a gift. In a free society, diverse persons control resources, and new holdings arise out of voluntary exchanges and actions of persons".

Nonetheless for some (Jonathan 1990, Ranson, 1992) the market is not a neutral mechanism but fiercely regressive, it does not increase freedoms but

redistributes them amongst groups and so the "...market actively confirms and reproduces the pre-existing social order of wealth, privilege and prejudice (Ranson 1990, p. 72). This relates to the view of Harvey (2005, p. 5) who argues that the "neo-liberal state reflects the interests of "...private property owners, business, multinational corporations and finance capital', clearly not the majority of people in society. In this context how can the dominance of a neo-liberal political economy, with its aim of imposing "market rules on all aspects of social life" be explained when it does not represent or act in the interests of all groups in society? (See Harvey 2005).

Hegemony

Hegemony is a way of framing and understanding the use of power in society. Particularly in relation to the way it helps explain how ruling groups are able to maintain their dominance over groups who have different and competing interests. For example Brookfield (2010, p. 94) suggests hegemony is the way we "...learn to embrace enthusiastically a system of beliefs and practices that end up harming us and working to support the interests of others who have power over us".

A key thinker associated with the development of the concept of hegemony is Antonio Gramsci (Brookfield 2010, p. 94). Gramsci developed hegemony to explain how the capitalist class was able to maintain their rule in societies that are divided on class terms and riven with social and economic contradictions causing inequality and social injustice. He wanted to understand why people living in capitalist societies seemed to "wear their chains willingly...seeing their reality through ruling class spectacles, unable to recognise their own servitude". (Armstrong 1988, p. 255). Evoking the image of the Centaur (half beast, half man), Gramsci (1991, 170) identified a "dual perspective" in relation to how ruling groups maintain their domination, making a distinction between "rule" and "hegemony". Rule can be understood as the use of force, it is exerted openly through the coercive organs of the state such as the police, army or judicial system. It is rule by domination and in mature, stable capitalist societies would only be apparent in times of crisis (Williams 1977). Hegemony however operates by generating a population's consent through moral, intellectual, ideological and political leadership. In developing the concept Gramsci's built on this key idea from Marx and Engels (2004, p 65/66),

"Each new class which puts itself in the place of the one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society...it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, valid ones."

Hegemony then is more about subtle persuasion, it is not forced on us, but is built and operates within the diverse range of institutions and social relationships that constitute “civic society” that lie outside the institutions of the state such as, religion, voluntary organisations, trade unions, cultural organisations, the media and importantly the education system (Williams 1977, Simon 1992). It is indirectly through the practices and ways of thinking that are developed in civil society that we learn to live and act in distinctive ways. As Brookfield (2010) suggests hegemony “...saturates all aspects of life and is constantly learned and relearned throughout life” (p. 98).

It is important to note that hegemony, although powerful, is also vulnerable to challenges (Williams 1977, 112) as it has to be formed and reformed in order to maintain a specific social group’s domination. For Gramsci this domination was based on class, however other writers, such as Fraser (2000 & 2013) have problematised and developed these ideas, broadening out understandings of domination in order to highlight the importance and recognition of other forms, based on race, gender or sexuality. Education is important in this process, both in terms of sustaining and challenging hegemony. As Gramsci claims “Every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship” (1991, 350). This opens up the opportunities to challenge and change hegemony and to develop what Gramsci calls a “counter hegemonic” project. Key to this is his distinction between “common” sense and “good” sense; common sense is an uncritical view of the world which unquestionably accepts the key hegemonic claims about the world and people’s place in it whereas “good sense” involves a critical rendering of taken-for-granted views which contain insights for a different way of ordering the world. The key for Gramsci was to develop in people the critical consciousness of “good” sense so people can become aware of their situation and come together to act to change it. It is the development of good sense that will help build a counter hegemonic project.

Governmentality

Michel Foucault is another thinker who analysed how government power operates on people to maintain rule. We want to draw on his work to explore how neo-liberalism influences and transforms the operation and actions of people working in the public services. Education, like other public services, has been reformed by the introduction of what Ball (2003, p 216) describes as “policy technologies”, which are “...the calculated deployment of techniques and artifacts to organise human forces and capabilities into functioning networks of power”. These “technologies” such as targets, outcomes and performance measures are key elements of a management philosophy that is described as New Public Management or New Managerialism (Clark

& Newman, 2006). However it is important to make clear a distinction between “management” and “managerialism” in this context. For example Cunliffe (2009) distinguishes between management or “old managerialism” and “New Managerialism”.

Old managerialism is seen as a neutral bureaucratic or technical activity relating for example to strategic planning, legislative compliance to promote greater equality or to challenge discrimination, and managing an organisation, its budgets and its employees. The “New Managerialism” is seen as being more specific and is “...associated with importing a market orientation and business practices into the public sector” (p. 18). According to some (MacKinnon, 2000 or Deem et al 2007) New Managerialism is seen as a vehicle the state has used to pursue a neo-liberal agenda and transform public services. This involves striving to dismantle the perceived failing bureaucracy of the social democratic welfare administration, which was seen as reflecting the vested interests of professionals and civil servants through embodying a collectivist political economy. As such Deem & Berhony (2005, p 220) suggest that “New Managerialism” is conceived of by some as a political activity and not just a technical one”. New Managerialism then introduces the ethos of the free market and business practices in an attempt to make these services more efficient and market friendly, as users are now free to relate to these services as individual active consumers and not passive recipients.

According to Clark, Cochrane & McLaughlin (1994, p. 228) the New Managerialism has reconfigured “the context and frames of reference – indeed the very language – within which decisions about public services are made”. This reflects the notion of discourse. A discourse is a system of thought, which frames how we think, act and view the world. It can prescribe what is possible and what is not, what is condoned and what is excluded and it is therefore a powerful means of shaping and describing the world. Howarth (2000, p. 49) suggests that it is “a means for different forces to advance their interests”. Therefore New Managerialism can be seen to act at a macro or institutional level in the interests of neo-liberals, yet it is also important to keep in view Foucault’s notion of “governmentality”, because it is useful for explaining how the New Managerialism acts at the micro level, on the individual practitioners who work in this new “regime of truth”. The discourse of New Managerialism then is a means by which the government exercises power over people, and ensures its policy aims are met, governmentality facilitates this process by exercising power in a way that encourages people to self regulate.

The “technologies” of New Managerialism, the targets, outcomes and performance indicators, can be thought of as the operation of governmentality, a means of enabling government to pursue their policy aims without the need to intervene directly in every activity, but by setting a context in

which people conform and “govern” or discipline themselves. New Managerialism and its “technologies” therefore create a powerful and dominant discourse, which frames what is legitimate or not in terms people’s speech, practice, thought or action in public services. If neo-liberalism is the “back story” driving these changes, then New Managerialism is the vehicle to introduce this change and enforce the ethos of the free market in to these services. However it can also be understood as a means of challenging the power of the professionals, as their “producer power”, the knowledge and expertise of professionals, cuts across and limits the active consumer power of a sovereign individual in a free market. New Managerialism then can also be seen as a mechanism to reshape professional “subjectivities”. For example as Thomas & Davies (2005, p 685) claim, behind the New Managerialism is a strong “... desire to introduce new disciplinary technologies designed to inculcate new attitudes, values, priorities and self understandings amongst professionals”.

Impact of neo-liberalism on educational work: problems and possibilities

The influence of neo-liberalism on education is significant and as Ball (2012, p. 2) suggests the change and realignment it has brought about may represent the “triumph of neo-liberal imaginary”. However this does present some problems for educators and the concept of employability can provide one example through which some of the problematic effects of neo-liberalism and New Managerialism can be illuminated and critically reviewed. We highlight two problems that arise. One relates to the “learnification” of education or the way a focus on the economic purpose of education changes the nature of educational relationships and purpose. Two we discuss the implications for adult and community educators and their practice.

The key problem relates to what Biesta (2006a 2006b & 2009) calls the “learnification” of education and the way the nature of relationships in the education process change through a shift in the use of language. He argues that the term “education” is a relational, dialogical concept between an educator and a student, where as “learning” is essentially an individualistic term. Reflecting the marketisation valued by neo-liberals, “learning” sees the learner as the sovereign consumer aware of their needs, the educator is the producer who’s role is to service that need and education becomes a commodity in this market process. The problem then is that understanding education only as “learning” means reinforcing the idea that education is seen primarily for its economic purpose and it hollows out the meaning of education, marginalising other purposes such the personally transformational, emancipatory or democratic. It also undermines the professional educators expertise and role in the process beyond that of “servicing of a learners needs”. As Beista (2006b) states;

“...to think of education as an economic transaction not only misconstrues the role of the learner and the educator in the educational relationship, it also results in a situation in which questions about the content and purpose of education become subject to the forces of the market instead of being the concern of professional judgment and democratic deliberation.” (p. 31)

The second problem relates to how this priority focus on the economic, seems to cut across what many believe to be community education’s “distinctive epistemology and methodology” (Tett 2010, p. 33). We would suggest that a focus on the economic purpose of education and the conception of employability favoured by government ultimately serves the interests of “private property owners, business, multinational corporations and finance capital” more than the individuals involved in this education. As Crowther (2006, p. 127) argues there is a “hidden agenda” in this learning, which involves the “...creation of malleable, disconnected, transient, disciplined workers and citizens”. Part of neo-liberalism’s hegemonic project is to remoralise society and create a new sense of “flexible” individualism which shifts the responsibility for welfare and prosperity from the state to the individual so they will “self capitalise” over their lifetime (Lingard, 2009, quoted in Ball 2012, p. 3). Education and employability are key constituents of this remoralisation. Therefore the danger here is that community educators can become involved in a process which reinforces the status quo and treats people as uncritical, passive “objects of policy”, rather than working to develop people as “active subjects in politics” (Shaw & Martin 2000, p 402).

We suggest that conceiving of people as “active subjects in politics” has for some, been a core element of community education work. For example, although community education is considered a contested concept, and has been influenced by change over time, Mackie et al (2012) draw on the work of Foucault and discourse analysis to argue that “...while discontinuities in discourse are evident, a range of features persist through change”. They also highlight some of these “persistent features” such as, the promotion of democracy and active citizenship, informal and social constructivist approaches to curriculum, and the promotion of individual and group agency.

The difficulty is that an increased focus on employability seems to contradict what many see as the key purposes of community education. Particularly in a context where the purpose and outcomes are defined by the Government and aimed narrowly at servicing the needs of the economy, rather than based on the dialogue between learner and educator with the aim of a wider social purpose. The result can be a dilemma for practitioners as they can “become liable to two masters: the practices and norms of the discipline, and the practices and norms of the market”. (Pileggi & Patton, 2003, 318 quoted in Garret 2010).

Conclusion

We have argued that the political economy of neo-liberalism and its particular nostrums have significantly influenced the purpose and practice of education since it emerged as a dominant force. For example, the core purpose of post 16 learning is now aligned more closely to serving the needs of the economy through an increased policy emphasis on employability. Educational relationships are being narrowed down to resemble individualised market transactions, rather than opening up the possibility of the collective development of a wider critical knowledge for social purpose. This policy focus on individual skills development also elides significant economic and social inequalities stemming from structural issues concerning the nature, ownership and operation of the economy. Furthermore the process of hegemony helps to secure the dominance of neo-liberalism and ensures free market ideas and ways of being are inculcated into the population. The scope of action for professionals in public services is limited by the “regime of truth” of New Managerialism and they are induced into accepting these new “subjectivities” by a process of governmentality. These new subjectivities include seeing the role of educators as producing individualised, self-capitalising and compliant workers able to adapt and compete in the knowledge driven economy. For community educators this can create problems as they can become “liable to two masters” as this employability focus can cut across professional values and practices.

Nonetheless we would argue that it is important, particularly for educators, to remember that neo-liberalism, although hegemonic, is not a self evident truth, but is normative and discursive and as Harvey (2005) suggests, works in the interest of particular groups in society. The solution neo-liberalism presents about how society should be organised is only one vision of how the world should work. We would do well to remember Karl Polanyi’s (quoted in Davidson et al 2010, p. 9) assessment of the ultimate conclusion of a free market approach being “the sole director of human fate”. He suggested it would result in the “demolition of society” and human beings would “perish from the effects of social exposure, they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation”. So what is to be done?

Whilst this neo-liberal hegemony is a powerful force there are some reasons for hope. For example as Gramsci points out, hegemony is never total, it is vulnerable and open to challenge. There are always small opportunities to question the remoralising of society and to develop a counter hegemonic project to challenge the economically determinist, individualistic, vision of education we are confronted with, provided the will and critical awareness are present.

Therefore in the context of being “liable to two masters”, community educators should try to align themselves more firmly to the field’s defining purpose, and key features. For example Kenneth Alexander (1993, p. 39), who chaired the committee that founded Community Education in Scotland, was clear what he thought a key purpose of Community Education was. He argued:

“...the engine of change, of social progress, must be a more effective democracy...adult education should openly and proudly adopt as a significant role, the strengthening of people’s ability to participate in the workings of an expanding democracy”

Therefore a policy focus that prioritises employability as the key purpose of education would seem to position some of Community Education’s defining features as “subjugated knowledge” (Foucault, 1980, p. 82). This is knowledge which has been disqualified or deemed inadequate by the neo-liberal, economist discourse. Although a focus on employability can frame a particular “subjectivity” for Community Educators, we would suggest they still have some autonomy, allowing them to also be the bearers of these “subjugated knowledges”. Whilst working within an employability context, that focuses on people as “objects”, they also have an opportunity to rediscover and reassert the subjugated “associational, democratic and empowering” elements of community education work (Wallace 2008, p 4) and so help develop people as “active subjects in politics”. Therefore in practice this would mean that although educators have to work around the “merely useful knowledge” of skills for the economy, at the same time they could also try to engage people in a critical discussion around the “really useful knowledge” of how these skills will be used in the economy and in who’s interests. Thus encouraging the collective exploration of how more democratic and socially just alternatives can be constructed.

As educators we need to be aware that our work can lead people to accept the status quo and reinforce their “private troubles”, or we can engage them in a critical dialogue about the “public issues” of society and perhaps help people think of better ways to organise it, focused on democracy and social justice. Therefore when working in an employability context Community Educators would do well to remember David Alexander’s (1994, p 49) comment that;

“It is no part of a democratic educator’s task to create educational and training ghettos or cognitively emasculated hovels which assist in inuring the materially poor to exploitation and poverty or to develop vocational skills programmes which condemn others to being the hewers of wood and the drawers of water”.

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