# A Practice for Freedom: Informal political education and youth work

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[22] In recent years there has been a significant development of organised social education in non-school settings, which has adopted, to varying degrees, the concerns and styles of approach often associated with youth work (1). This article briefly examines the potential of those concerns and styles as a medium for political education, and outlines one way of integrating the conscious development of young people's political understanding into youth work (2).

Given thoughtful preparation and the picking up of suitable cues it is clear that fairly ordinary events can provide extraordinary possibilities for learning. To illustrate this I have taken one episode from a fairly straightforward piece of work:

*Just after club had finished, Neil came Into the office and asked if we could organise an ice-skating trip. He thought we could easily fill a coach if we charge £1.50 per person. How did he arrive at £1.50 we asked? That's what the British Legion had charged. How many people had he spoken to? About half a dozen. In the end It was agreed that he should take a list around next club night to gauge the response. He got 45 names, and a delegation trouped in, would we now organise the coach and book the rink? You do it, we suggest, and after some discussion they go away and decide a date. Tony and Sue return, phone a bus company, and book a 42-seater. That's three less seats than people who said they wanted to go, we say, and anyway where are we going to sit? People are bound to drop out comes the answer. They leave a scribbled note for the secretary to type in the morning. Meanwhile Neil is out canvassing the choice of rink. 'Queens' is the most popular, so Tony and Sue do their bit again. What are you going to charge?*

*They'd clean forgotten to ask the cost of a the coach. Another phone call and Mike (a trainee milkman and skilful with figures!) produced the answer - £1.65if we were going to allow a little leeway for those who didn't turn up on the day and to give a tip to the driver. Mike took responsibility for the deposits, giving them to us to bank.*

It is obvious from the above account that a whole range of emotional and social skills were being utilized by this group of 15–18-year-olds, (all 'low stream secondary modern[1]) and at a level that had taken a [23] substantial amount of the workers time to develop. For instance Neil had considerable difficulties in relating to anyone in authority and often.to his peers. His frequent violent outbursts and apparent concern only for his own feelings had gained him the reputation of being a "right bastard" and posed the workers considerable problems in terms of role, goal (e.g. integration or exclusion) and method. It had taken two years to establish a comfortable relationship between Neil and the workers and what was significant about his suggestion of an ice-skating trip was not so much that he had made it, but that he had taken responsibility to do something about it. The practical skills involved in this instance - using a telephone directory, writing a business letter, knowing what to say to the rink manager, were all significant steps to these youngsters and had been largely learnt through the intervention of the workers. (3)

At the beginning of the account I suggested that this way of working is "straightforward", unfortunately it is not too common. Youth and community work is concerned with product and process, and it is the differing emphasis put on these by both workers and managers that, to a large degree, brings about the relative shortage of reasonable social education practice in youth clubs.

Product in this instance refers to "the interest of workers in specific, tangible and material products from the efforts of groups" (4), and process goals are "to do with the workers perceptions of, hopes for, and relationships with the people who constitute the action system. These process, interactional, educational or relationship goals refer to the enhancement and strengthening of the competence of participants". (5) Workers and administrators are, in general, keen on practice that can be readily seen and counted (although not assessed qualitively). Examples of "material outcomes" would be the number of football teams a club fields, attendance on club nights or building usage. The reasons for

this concern with material outcome is not difficult to see - the need to justify provision to political masters, (who view youth work as being rather more about social control than social education), lack of appropriate worker skills, the difficulties surrounding the assessment of improvements in social skills, and the fear of failure when adopting "new" approaches are all certainly significant factors (6).

To return to our initial example of practice, the "material product" was an ice-skating trip that in the end had 29 participants, a financial loss (£16) and left four members stranded in London when they did not turn up on time for the returning coach (the decision of the [24] organisers). It is not an outcome that recommends itself to youth work administrators keen to justify their work by reference to industrial/consumption standards. However the educational significance of the experience was not lost on the participants. On the next trip organised they demanded larger deposits and increased the price. Nobody was late for the return journey!

The decision to leave people behind marked an interesting stage in the group's developing confidence and ability to weigh up the coach driver's impatience and the responsibility to return younger members home at a reasonable time, against the ability of the late four to handle their predicament and the consequent strains on friendship. The workers in our example followed a conscious policy of rarely organising events without substantial involvement of young people in planning and implementation. This meant a much smaller programme of events because of the amount of workers time devoted to 'process' goals. In short, the workers had sought to provide a sympathetic context in which a range of social skills could be developed and used and responsibility for the outcomes of particular actions accepted.

## The nature of this approach

Five characteristics of this style of approach are worth briefly discussing at this stage. This approach to learning is opportunist, experiential, voluntary, participatory and integrated.

### *1. Opportunism*

The approach is opportunist because there was very little attempt to impose a

curriculum as such. Rather the aim was to provide an environment in which the everyday stimuli both the workers and young people experienced could be handled. This is in somewhat marked contrast to the work of Dr Leslie Button (7) which had gained considerable currency in youth work training and is attracting not a little attention from schoolers (8). Button's approach is based on a graduated unfolding of participants' experience, exposing them, at specific points in a curriculum, to particular events and challenges. Unfortunately such a clean developmental approach does not fit well with what actually happens in young people's lives. Events bunch, they appear out of context and are ungraduated, i.e. the "easy crises" need not appear first. Many workers have discovered that it is, on the whole, unnecessary to manufacture events or stimuli, rather they exist in such profusion that recognition and response pose a major problem of choice. The fact that the workers [25] were attempting to deal with situations that were felt to be significant by the young people themselves obviously allows the possibility of some extraordinary learning - but this has to be set against the random and patchy sequence in which it is taking place. Given the voluntary nature of the enterprise there is a surprising stability of membership over time, the usual 'career' of a youth club member being somewhere between 6 months and 3 years or more, which tempers this disadvantage.

### *2. Experiential learning*

The case for experiential learning does not need to be made here. The Programme for Political Education specifically endorsed it and numerous writers have sought to define practice in this area (9). There are, however, a number of points worth making about the 'worker/client' relationship in experiential learning and the particular status of 'experience' in adolescence.

In adolescence the individual is consciously trying to make sense of the relationship of the external world to him/herself, and in doing so creating a sense of self, of individuality. At this time we are reaching a stage of sexual, intellectual and physical 'readiness' well in advance of a significant body of experience to handle this growth. One response of young people to this unease and the sense of dislocation and the painful disorder it entails is, claims one writer, "to try to explain the future totally, completely all at once, in order to gain control over the outpouring of new life and new possibility" (10). We are,

therefore, faced with three characteristics. Firstly the individual who possesses "experience", either real or invented, gains in status amongst his or her peers, by virtue of the fact of its relative scarcity in this stage of development. Secondly, when people are recounting 'experiences' it is quite usual for them to present their role as being rather more central to the particular episode than it necessarily was. This largely unconscious reinterpretation of events is quite different from the conscious invention of experience in order to gain status. Thirdly, as a defence against pain there is a tendency to "assume the lessons of experience without undergoing the actual experience itself" (11). It therefore pays the worker to be sceptical about what is presented as "experience". The story telling should be enjoyed for what it is but essentially a workers most useful role is to help people separate out concrete experience on [26] which learning (making the connection between cause and consequence) can happen. This process is made more difficult by a lack of awareness of the differing significance attached by participants to particular events and experiences.

One of the things that the so called "caring professions" have provided us with is a language by which we can describe and interpret feelings. Obviously that language (and the training which produces it), age, class, role and character are significant factors in defining the nature of the social distance between 'worker' and 'client'. It might be that participants are using the same words but are meaning quite different things by them. This is not simply a product of that social distance but also of the limited ability of the language to handle complex feelings and emotions.

An example which illustrates some of the problems we are describing is the way we sometimes deal with sexuality and, in particular, attitudes to homosexuality. The process that Sennett describes often leads young people into cruelly inaccurate stereotyping, which is extraordinary difficult to break down, partly because of the potential threat to sexual self-image and partly due to the absence of appropriate circumstances for open and sensitive handling of the question. 'Classroom[1] discussions involving young people at similar stages of understanding and orientation normally offer the prospect of only marginal gains amongst those less aggressively maintaining their identity. Where workers have attempted to go beyond this stage by bringing together groups of young homosexuals and heterosexuals, the effects on participants (both 'adult' and 'adolescent') have often been fascinating. A significant number of 'adults' have

demonstrated by their reactions just how they were still locked into their own adolescent 'world picture' and were consequently too busy handling their own feelings to be able to pay much attention to the needs of the people they were supposed to be working with. On the other hand those workers most at home with their sexuality and sensitive to the demands of the situation were in a position to enable quite large jumps in young people's understanding of sexuality. The social educator, if s/he is to constructively influence young people's image of themselves in the world needs to have broken through that initial wish to explain events in advance of experience. In short, s/he should be mature (12).

The requirement of maturity will appear to many to be so obvious as to be almost not worth stating but unfortunately it is not at all uncommon to find people for whom teaching and youth work represents [27] a continuing search for vitality and potency as Harry Specht points out:

> While the young are entitled to make their search, they should not be cheered on to satisfy the needs of ageing middle class professional intellectuals and academics to feel alive, relevant and needed The very least the young should expect from us is the discipline and the guts to tell them when we think they are foolish or unreasonable. I think that this desire for the adoration of youth has frequently prevented some of my professional colleagues whether in the academy or in the field, from fulfilling this expectation. (13)

When conscious experiential learning is attempted, it is essential that the worker remains an enabler and is not drawn into denying young people access to that learning by taking on what seem attractive roles for him/herself. Too often workers have seen themselves as advocates professing to speak for young people rather than directing their effort into helping people develop skills for themselves or have allowed their own unworked through feelings to cloud their response to young people's needs.

### *3. Voluntary and participant learning*

The third and fourth elements to this approach are best dealt with together. Arguably, it is these elements that most clearly differentiate this type of intervention from schooling. The approach is voluntary not just because the

recipients are free to choose whether to opt in or out of an activity in what is seen as their 'spare time' ie because attendance is not statutory, but because the workers involved are, in the most part, also there in their spare time. Part-timers (14) introduce a breadth of experience and sense of reality than can easily got lost in single occupational communities such as schools. They often have a job or lifestyle which is far more familiar and closer to the young person's experience and aspiration than say that of a teacher or social worker. By providing 'models' that are readily identified with, the potential for social education is greatly increased, unfortunately what is often lacking are the requisite skills and time commitment to capitalise on this advantage (15).

"Participation" has long been a part of youth work ideology, a motif that often appears as meaning all things to all people. Rather too often it has been seen as involvement in a particular activity without any [28] reference to the amount of power participants have over that situation. In the example under discussion young people chose to do something, took responsibility for organising it and did it.

To enable them to carry the action through they chose to learn certain skills which satisfied the workers objectives, and, in turn, the event itself satisfied the managers old desire for organised leisure provision (16). It was no accident that the different groups expectations were met as over a considerable period of time efforts had been made to make the groups aware of each other's interests and to negotiate changes. For instance, whilst the workers felt their role was to work with young people not for them, they occasionally took on a direct organising role in response to the demands of parts of the membership who refused initially to take any part in organising their own activities and entertainment.

The managers developed from a group almost totally concerned with running a building and a metaphysical quality called "the clubs good name", to a committee who saw their major function as creating space (freed from local authority interference, community criticism and financial problems) for informal social education work. They viewed a £100 loss on the user managed coffee bar as a reasonable investment for learning.

The membership became far more aware of the constraints on action - statutory

e.g. the Health and Safety at Work Act, managerial, e.g. local authority rules on building usage and personal, e.g. the workers need for time off. They also were much more aware of what was possible.

Lastly the distinction between the various groups - managers, workers and members (in terms of membership rather than role) became far less clear - 25% of the Management Group were 'members', nearly an equal number 'workers' and about half the workers were 'former' members. What had been achieved was an environment in which young people could create situations for their own enjoyment and learning and effect their outcomes more comprehensively than simply 'voting with their feet'.

*4. Integrated learning*

The approach is integrated in two important respects. Firstly the actual process of 'learning' is not seen as separate from the other aspects of club or group life. It is not something that is 'done' to young people at a special time or place. Secondly, care was taken by the workers to avoid encouraging the development of separate elite groups within the club although, inevitably, there was a feeling amongst certain sections [29] of the membership that this had happened. A considerable amount of thought was given by the workers and the active membership groups to the potential problems of alienation and non-involvement. It was of particular concern to the workers as they felt strongly that any understandings reached by members should not separate them from their own cultural environment ie the skills and knowledge gained should be usable for both their own and immediate peers benefit rather than creating a new specialist skills elite.

## Integrating political education into youth work practice

We have examined a form of youth work which has emphasised process rather than product goals and is opportunist, experiential, voluntary, participatory and integrated in its approach to learning.

The potential for informal political education in this kind of setting will be now quite apparent particularly if we examine the skill areas that form the basis of any comprehensive social education enterprise. These skills could be listed as follows:-

1. *Observational/Informational skills*. The ability to assimilate and retrieve the raw material for investigation - listening, seeing, remembering.

2. *Thinking skills*. The ability to interpret and evaluate information, organise information in concepts and work out the consequences (imagination).

3. *Communication skills*. The ability to express one's own interests and views in a variety of forms - non-verbal, verbal, written and 'drawn'. Also to be able to understand the dynamics of the medium chosen e.g. telephone, letters, video.

4. *Action skills*. The ability to organise observational, thinking, communication and motor skills around a particular purpose in order to effectively influence a

situation. [30]

These interconnecting first level skills (examples of second level skills would be how to use a duplicator, a filing system or a dictionary) were all evident in the example quoted and are exactly the same broad skills areas to which the political educator must address him/herself. The action-based content of this particular approach to youth work and the framework in which it is located provides an opening to a form of political education that has been notoriously difficult to introduce into schools. Lawrence Freedman poses the following as the central dilemma in political education:

> Our democratic political theory encourages us, through education, to instil a sense of the worth of, and develop the requisite capabilities for, active participation as citizens. However the realities of central and local government, and the distribution of power within society, militate against the possibility of most citizens exercising effect influence over the events and institutions that shape their lives.
>
> .... the role of political education given these circumstances, is to help the student confront the problems of power as it affects his life.... What it should involve is the conscious politicisation of the many experiences and phenomena that make up a student's everyday life" (17).

Such a 'situationist* approach by getting beyond seeing politics as the relationship between the government and the governed or as a decision-making process, makes it highly relevant to a number of current concerns in community and youth work (18).

Many workers reacting against the excessive concentration on psychological approaches in the sixties have sought to located their work in a broader structural framework, reflecting C Wright Mills well known precept "that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues - and in the terms of the problems of history making". Also, "that the human meaning of public, issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles - and the problems of the individual life" (19).

Secondly, one of the major problems faced by workers is their 'clients' feelings

of powerlessness and lack of self-esteem. Freedman's analysis of the structural reality of their position confirms this subjective assessment, particularly bearing in mind the predominantly working class character of youth clubs membership. Just how much this is an objective assessment is open to debate - it was certainly the workers feeling in our example that there were significant dysfunctions within the 'system' that provided the kind of openings that could be exploited by young people (20). It could be argued that the importance of these dysfunctions was marginal [31] compared say to the employment effects of a fluctuating exchange rate but in terms of the hopes the young people had for their own lives and community they were not insignificant.

Lastly as May points out, a beginning can be made with only a small number of analytical tools (21). The approach to political education in youth work currently sponsored by the National Association of Youth Clubs for instance takes 'power' as its central organising concept -

> ... what is of significance to us is who has the power to determine the dominant models of relationships such as the structure of the family or the distribution of income, why they have that power and how it is used - also why it is felt appropriate and by whom it is felt appropriate that they should hold that power? (22)

If we return to the example of practice we have been using young people have been having to ask questions such as 'who in the end controls the use of the club building?[1], 'where can we get more money to open the club on more nights?' and 'what are we going to offer unemployed school leavers?' They have direct access to councillors through bodies such as management committees and, in this specific example, a growing awareness of holes in the 'system' that can be exploited to get additional resources for the things they think important.

The obvious criticism of such a 'situationist' approach is, as Tapper and Salter point out, that the school could find itself at the centre of a political storm if some of 'their' young people are involving themselves in highly sensitive local political issues (23). Whilst not wanting to diminish the possible difficulties involved it is worth pointing out that in a number of important respects the type of youth work situation described have differed greatly from the position schools could find themselves in. Firstly, youth clubs are a non- statutory

provision, young people chose for themselves whether they want to be involved in political education and action. They do not have to undertake a particular action because it is part of a curriculum. Secondly youth work has maintained a strong element of 'voluntarism' in its work. This manifests itself in say the large number of clubs that raise the major part of their income independently of local authorities, the voluntary status of many of the workers and a in conscious efforts to involve the local community in its work.

Thirdly youth work ideology has always had a strong participatory element - a belief in the importance of young people taking decisions for themselves although the extent to which this is carried into the [32] running of the club varies greatly. Lastly the role of the youth worker has, of late, become more generally recognised as that of an "enabler" (hence the change in title from youth leader to youth worker). This role change, providing it is understood by the various 'parties' loosens the association of the worker with the outcome of any action undertaken by the young people s/he is working with. The NAYC Political Education Project has placed a great deal of stress on the need to get a clear understanding of, and agreement on, this enabling role by managers, workers and the young people concerned. One way of reaching agreement especially between the workers and managers suggested by the project is the use of a contract setting out the various expectations the different parties have of the work and the means by which any differences can be easily resolved (24). By clearly agreeing objectives and working methods from the start it is hoped that responsibility for actions is, and can be seen to be, located with the initiators of that action - the young people themselves. Workers who for whatever reason, are seduced into active leadership and advocacy thereby appropriating the learning for themselves, lay themselves open to charges of unprofessionalism and to being made a scapegoat when things go 'wrong'. The making of an 'agreement' between the various parties is an important piece of political education in itself because the questions that have to be asked and answered, such as who has the power and authority to sanction the work, are part of the central pivot on which this approach is based. The 'agreement' need not be about a decision to do something called 'political education', more likely it will be about a broad way of working and specific social education objectives (25).

## Conclusion - A Practice for Freedom

Paulo Freire when he described education as a "practice for freedom" talks about people crossing "the frontier which separates being from being more" (26). Warren C Hagstrom explores a social journey into the acting community (27). This article has attempted to show that youth work can provide a context in which the necessary belief, skills and knowledge for such a movement can be acquired.

Neils request for an ice skating trip might be an odd starting point but the fact that he ended up a creator rather than a mere consumer added something to his developing understanding of 'himself in the world'. Maybe next time he walks through the office door it will be to announce the groups [33] intention to organise another trip. A small step perhaps but not without its personal and political significance.

## References

1. This development can be seen as following a number of strands:

- Projects linked with schools such as the Watford Social Education project (formerly sponsored by the Community Projects Foundation) and the ROSLA Community Education Project, Bristol (See R White and D Brockington (In and Out of School, RKP) 1978
- The social and life skills element of MSC schemes.
- Youth and adult literacy projects (for examples of this type of work see the publications of groups like Centreprise and the Hackney Reading Centre).
- Mainstream youth work itself has developed a variety of strategies to enhance specific skills.

2. For a historical overview of political education in youth work see: Dr. F. Milson's article in this journal and his forthcoming pamphlet (*Coming of Age*, NYB) 1979. Also S Bunt and R Gargrave, *The Politics of Youth Clubs* (forthcoming) NAYC Publications.

3. See R White (*op cit*) for a short discussion of the improvement of basic "survival" skills.

4. D N Thomas, Journey into the Acting Community: Experiences of learning and change in community groups in N McCaughan (Ed), *Group Work - learning and practice*, George Allen and Unwin 1978, 168.

5. A M Kramer and H Specht, *Readings in Community Organisation Practice*, Pentice Hall 1969, 9.

6. Josephine Klein makes the point that many of us in this culture are, "more apt to be managerial than to be loving, and we need to be constantly on guard against this cultural tendency to manage things so we shall not be blamed". J Klein, *Training for the New Helping Professions*, University of London Goldsmiths College 1973, 8.

7. L. Button *Discovery and Experience*, Oxford University Press) 1971 and *Developmental Group Work with Adolescents*, University of London Press 1974.

8. The influence of Dr Button can be seen, for example, in the work of the Blackburn Curriculum Development Centre.

9. The best-known example being, I suppose, H Entwistle *Political Education in a Democracy*, RKP 1971.

10. R. Sennett *The Uses of Disorder*, Penguin 1973, 27. Sennett's approach borrows heavily from the work of Erik Erikson. See in particular his *Childhood and Society*, Penguin (now Paladin) 1965.

11. Sennett p 27.

12. I am not very happy, however, about the concept however. Dr Josephine Klein makes 'maturity[1] conditional on the abilities to:

1. delay the response to a stimulus [34]

2. be more discriminating

3. more realistic

4. more idealistic

5. be capable of more activities and more complicated activities

6. use a longer time perspective

J. Klein *Human Behaviour and Personal Relationships*, NAYC, 1976.

13. H Specht *Community Development in the UK*, Association of Community Workers 1974, 5-6

14. I have used 'part-timer' as a generic term - many workers are paid by the LEA on a sessional rate - but the vast majority give their services voluntarily.

15. For an interesting discussion of the way young people use adults as models see J L Bazalgette, *Freedom, Authority and the Young Adult*, Pitman Publishing 1971 and J L Bazalgette and B D Reed, *The Industrial Coach*, Grubb Institute 1977 which is an account of an experiment in work-based education - using fellow workers to 'teach* new entrants a variety of social skills.

16. Managers in this section refers to the Management Committee of the club. Elsewhere it is used to define the management function whether it is held by a local authority officer or a voluntary committee.

17. L Freedman, Approaching Politics, *Teaching Politics*, Vol 4 (1974) p 7. An example of this type of approach can be seen in the work of the Nottingham University Social Education Project 1972.

18. An interesting discussion of the situationist approach can be found in N May, Teaching and Learning about Society via Politics, *Teaching Politics* 5 1976 153-161.

19. C Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Penguin 1970, 248. For a good discussion of the growing awareness of the political dimension of youth work see B Davies *Part-time Youth Work in a Northern Industrial Town*, NYB 1974.

20. P Willis, *Learning to Labour*, Saxon House 1978. Examines these dysfunctions in relation to the transition from school to work.

21. N May *op cit* 158.

22. M Smith *Political Education - Project Plan*, NAYC 1979 4.12.

23. T Tapper and B Salter *Education and the Political Order*, Macmillan 1978, 81.

24. M Lavelle, Relationships - A Sixth Form Course, *Youth in Society* 32 (December 1978) provides an example of the use of 'contracts' within school settings.

25. The NAYC Political Education Project is at present writing up examples

of specific political education initiatives. Further details of which can be obtained from the Project c/o P 0 Box 1, NUNEATON, Warks.

26. Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin 1972. (Cultural Action for Freedom Penguin) 1972.

27. Quoted in D N Thomas (*op cit*).