Voice, discourse and transformation: enabling learning for the achieving of social change.

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SM & KMcA   Readers will notice immediately that this paper does not look like most conference papers do, even collaboratively written ones. This is deliberate. Our research inquiries are based on the same critically reflexive methodology (see eg Holland, R,1999; Alvesson, M & Skoldberg, K, 2000) but the purposes of them are different. Similarly, we both teach on courses in the broad field of community based education which display many similarities but which lead to different qualifications. We have found that both are enriched by regularly coming together to engage in critically reflexive dialogues about our research and teaching. We have tried, therefore, to reflect that dialogical, and in places dialectical, nature of the process in the way we present our ideas here. Also, given the importance that we attach to the concept of voice in our work and this paper it seemed particularly appropriate to allow the reader to hear our individual as well as collective voices.

Lifelong Learning is central to both our research and our engagement with students in higher education who are studying community education (community learning and development). A major component of our work is with those who are going to play key roles in working towards achieving change for individuals and also change in communities as envisioned by current Government policy in Scotland. As part of our work as both researchers and tutors, we increasingly engage in critically reflexive dialogue with each other and with our students. Out of this process has emerged a sense of disquiet with Government policy in relation to lifelong learning. As a result of this, we have become increasingly concerned at the narrowness of the vision of lifelong learning to be found in the current Government agenda.

In our respective tutoring roles we seek to work with students to enable them to find their own enabling voice as an integral part of their development as agents of social change. We are firmly of the view that one cannot achieve transformative social change unless one can challenge discourse. For we consider that

> Discourse is social practice, not just verbal or written texts, that constitutes and is constituting of a social self. Human beings thus do not create unified social theories or observe an objective reality, but through discourses construct and constitute social reality. Discourses constrain the possibilities of thought, keeping the 'unthinkable' at bay so that certain discourses are privileged over others by virtue of their unquestioned application. This opens up to us the concepts of marginalised and dominant discourses, and the network of conditions that maintain their position within fields of knowledge. (Zweeger, 2000)

We are also of the view that before one can challenge discourse and the social reality it creates one must find one's own distinctive voice and the critical thinking it articulates. The development of voice is a crucial staging point on the way to embarking on the

transformation of one's personal perspective as a prelude to working towards the transformation of one's community or society.

SM   My commitment to the above statement is firmly rooted in my own experiences as an activist, an academic and a researcher but first and foremost it is rooted in my experiences as a woman. I discovered feminism in the 70s or perhaps I should say it found me. Events in my own life made me susceptible to the ideas of Friedan (1963), Greer (1971) and Millett (1979) and others. They were not only putting into words feelings that I recognised but had previously found it hard to articulate but they also gave me a critical language I could use to look at my life and reconceptualise it. Later, the works of Spender (1980), hooks (1984) and Giroux (1989) opened me up to the idea that language did not just describe reality but played a pivotal role in shaping it too. The result was that I gained a whole new way of explaining and understanding my world and I became a different me as a result. I found not only a language but also a voice, my voice, one that enabled me to not only describe my reality but to challenge it and to transform it. This was not an entirely book-driven process; an integral part of it was the women worker's group that I and colleagues in the Rochdale Community Education Service formed. We banded together initially for mutual support in a male dominated hierarchy but it soon became more than that. We were striving to ensure that our voices were heard in the service, to ensure that our experiences were validated but in the process we began to subject our experiences to critical examination, to realise that those experiences were social constructs and that they could be constructed differently should we choose. We thus began to interrogate the interests and ideologies that informed the meanings we placed on those experiences. We sought to reconstitute the discourses that shaped our lives and to introduce that discourse into out professional practice as community educators. It is this process that I have sought ever since to embed my educational practice in, both in community settings and now in higher education.

KMcA   The interest for me of voice comes from my own work with people who have experienced some form of disadvantage in an educational context. Working in training in the textiles industry in Australia, I heard a manager in the context of the appropriateness of training for his workforce refer to one of his sewing machine operators as "just a pair of hands." This led me to establish a training project called "Not Just a Pair of Hands" designed to raise awareness of the complexity of occupations that are often undervalued, perhaps more because of the status of those who do them rather than the actual complexity of the occupation. My research interests lie in the ways in which different forms of education seem to be counted differently for different kinds of people. I have found over the 20 years of my involvement in education that assumptions are made about the way people are and therefore the educational choices available to them or made for them by us as educators. Education at whatever level has the potential to enshrine inequality by placing limits on what is or is not provided. I have felt a need for the voice of those who experience some form of disadvantage to be both articulate and to be heard.

At a practical level Bernstein (1990) points to the different kinds of language used by different kinds of people, leading to the observation that the language of education is middle class. More recently Ball (2003) points out the link between class and the possibility of educational choice, the middle class being able to take advantage of choices. For me, voice refers to a quality beyond practical language or choices. Voice in a context of the desire for change or transformation implies for me the need for a balanced understanding of self, expressing a personal discourse about important aspects

of life. Voice is critical to those who seek change for themselves and those who seek change for others.

SM & KMcA We often find differences in the way that we interpret what are shared ideas in origin but which in practice affect our thinking differently and this paper is no exception. As an educator, Karen's concern about voice lies firmly in the domain of its relevance to the learning of the individual. Her concern is that the individual learner's voice which is a manifestation of a developed sense of self should be heard in order that account can be taken of his/her expressed needs. This requires that voice is developed in those we educate in the field of community education and that these community education students learn to assist in the development of the voice of others. Karen would argue that the sense of self which underpins our understanding of voice is derived from experience and work on or with this experience contributes to the development of an articulate and well considered voice. It is this well considered and closely nurtured voice that has a greater chance of ensuring expressed needs are heard. Our community education students can engage themselves not only with the need for voice to be heard but also with the relevant ears being made to listen.

Sue, however, has a slightly different approach to the understanding of voice in that though she also identifies herself as an educator she comes from a different tradition to the one that Karen comes from and her perspective owes much to her background as a social scientist. Her concern with voice lies less with the development of the individual and much more firmly in the domain of social collective action. The development of a personal voice is a pre-requisite for that process but it is only one staging post on the way to using that voice to critique the forces that shape one's lives, to reconstruct one's own experience from a new and more emancipated perspective and finally to challenge the prevailing discourse so that one can engage in working for social change in conjunction with others who share that voice. In Sue's experience the people who are able to do this are those who can not only read the word in order to read the world as per the work of Freire and others (eg Freire and Macedo, 1987; Freire and Shor, 1987) but who as a result recognise that the world can be changed too. We find that this ongoing tension between the development of the individual and the achieving of social change that is to be found in our thinking, our work and our respective research inquiries is a creative one and a source of stimulation and challenge. Our regular critically reflexive dialogues around this tension have led us to conclude that whatever our differences, we are agreed about one thing: that current government policy does not and is not intended to foster the sort of transformative change that we are working towards. We have found that the discourse that informs the current agenda is not the one that informs our work.

KMcA Government policy refers to community learning and development (what used to be referred to as community education) as critical to the empowerment of both individuals and the community (Community Learning and Development: The Way Forward, Scottish Executive; 2002). The policy document is full of worthy desires for building sustainable communities and establishing dialogue with communities but the transformative process is not addressed in an educational context other than implicitly through the development of learning plans and other similar activities. There is a long tradition of social purpose adult education (Barr: 1999) which responds to its own rather than the Government's agenda.   This is perhaps the domain in which we seek not just the participation of disadvantaged populations but where we seek to help them frame their own agenda for transformation through a developed voice and discourse.

SM   Karen and I would firmly locate our work within the latter domain but if that domain is increasingly at odds with the Scottish Executive's agenda for community learning, how much greater is the disjunction between it and their perception of what constitutes lifelong learning. Firstly, linking Lifelong Learning with Enterprise and Transport as a ministerial portfolio is always going to grate with those of us who regard lifelong learning as an educational activity! Secondly and more importantly, the Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2003) makes it clear that the transformation they are working towards is an economic one. I consider it to be very significant that the introduction to the strategy states that:

> Lifelong learning policy in Scotland is about personal fulfilment and enterprise; employability and adaptability; active citizenship and social inclusion.

The linkages made in that statement and the order in which they are set out makes it clear that the Executive is of the view that the learner is most likely to find fulfilment via playing their part in the development of the economy. Furthermore, it goes on to justify the investment in lifelong learning primarily on economic grounds too:

> Investment in quality-assured learning offers benefits to the individual, to the economy and to wider society. The knowledge, skills and competencies and other attributes that people acquire through learning, contribute to economic activity. Their economic behaviour, especially in the way their accumulation of knowledge and skills enables them to improve their position in the labour market, increases productivity and earnings, and collectively enhances the society in which they live. **Investment in knowledge and skills brings direct economic returns to individuals and collective economic returns to society.**

It becomes clear from both the strategy document and the Ministerial Response (2003) to it that the purpose of community learning and development in this policy context is to encourage people to re-engage with learning as a first step towards engagement with more formal further and higher education. The transformation envisaged by such a policy and justified on such grounds is a long way from the transformation that Karen and I seek to achieve.

Karen and I are very conscious of the fact that we have positively benefited from our involvement in the formal education system, both as students and now as academics. It gave and continues to give us an economically secure future. We are both firmly committed to increasing educational opportunities and widening access so that others can too. But we also want more than that. Opening up access to the benefits that vocational and academic qualifications can bring to as many people as possible does nothing to challenge the nature and structure of a society that severely disadvantages those who are unable or choose not to participate in such certificated learning or are excluded from economic life for whatever reason. I concede that current policy may make for a fairer society but it will be one in which there will still be economic differentials between different groups and merely opening the doors wider so that more people may enter does not transform the basic structure of the building. Karen and I are concerned that without a more radical transformation of society into one that values people for more than just their economic contribution or the qualifications they have obtained that the voices of the most disadvantaged will be even less likely to be heard.

SM & KMcA   In this paper we have sought through a critically reflexive dialogue with each other to explore the sources of our disquiet with current Government policy initiatives in the broad field of Lifelong Learning in Scotland and to share it with a wider audience. We think that we have been able to develop a critique of those policies via reflecting on the ways in which we try and work towards ensuring that both individual and collective voices are heard as part of transformative learning experiences and why this is important to us. This has led us to conclude that some voices are privileged at the expense of others and that in particular some community voices are currently silenced and only those that share in the Government discourse are heard. We would like to take the opportunity that this conference offers to receive feedback on and engage in a wider discussion of these ideas as part of our ongoing research as well as on the research methodology we have been developing.

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