Framing educational groupwork

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Abstract: This article sets out a framework for groupwork that is educational in the Freirian (1972) sense of education for liberation as opposed to domestication. It reworks the idea of 'critical social science' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), to describe a form of practice which is not an event but a process of working towards a preferred future. The three-stage process is illustrated with reference to a case study in which the work moves beyond personal development and consciousness-raising to social action. The article may encourage others to consider their own experience more carefully, or to engage critically in a dialogue about their ideas and sources. It concludes with a justification for the value, place and usefulness of theoretical frameworks.

Key words: educational groupwork, theoretical frameworks, group development, critically informed action

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Introduction

This article sets out a framework for critical and theoretically informed work with small groups. The kind of practice envisaged is not an event, a final or ultimate moment of radical work, but a process of working towards a preferred future. It is therefore within reach of all informal educators who seek to engage people in a collective and collaborative learning experience. In this conception the work moves beyond personal and group development to social action. The purpose is to challenge oppressive aspects of the social order to create just, equitable and democratic conditions. Whilst this kind of language appears far-fetched and over-politicised, equivalent sentiments can be easily detected in the mission statements, aims and objectives of many social purpose services and agencies. The terminology reflects the stated intentions of the UK Government's current policy commitments to Lifelong Learning, Social Inclusion and Active Citizenship and has particular relevance to the latter. Though set within a Scottish context, the argument here should resonate with practitioners across the UK and beyond.

In Scotland, a topical discussion paper entitled *Building an Active Democracy* (Community Learning Scotland, 2001) raised a number of important issues in relation to active citizenship. It stated that there were examples of good practice but that they needed to be documented more diligently and systematically if they were to be made more widely available. Practitioners were also said to need help in terms of staff development and guidance. It also noted that, 'A growing body of research on community education and active citizenship is emerging in Scotland. As yet much of it is descriptive rather than analytical and more of the latter is required' (Community Learning Scotland, 2001, p.28). Documenting practice and being more analytical implies a fusion of practical and theoretical elements. To encompass both aspects, this article weaves a social action case study into a theoretical framework based on the ideas of 'socially useful theory' (Anyon, 1994) and 'critical social science' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). The argument brings together and develops ideas presented in a series of previous articles in relation to youth work practice (Bamber and Murphy, 1999; Bamber, 2000; Bamber, 2002). It concludes with a justification for the value, place and usefulness of such frameworks.

In places the theoretical account may seem dense but the reader is asked to persevere as the detail closely describes significant micro processes that deserve attention. Table 1 provides an overview so that the whole can be better appreciated. In any case, it is anticipated that those interested may return to the text for analytical and developmental purposes. There is a clear relationship between educational groupwork and the social action process and this is highlighted at appropriate points in the article.

The idea of educational groupwork

Freire (1972) poses a fundamental question for educators, which is a valuable starting point for the analysis of groupwork practice. At the risk of oversimplification, education either moulds people into society's requirements or assists them to become critical and to make changes where they see fit. For Freire (1973, p.94) the latter involves, 'the permanent search of people together with others for their becoming more fully human in the world in which they exist.' Two things intertwine in this process: action and reflection. His ideas and methodology were developed with illiterate peasants in Brazil, but in a British context Mullender and Ward (1991) have reworked the essence of the approach by addressing the 'how' of social action. They argue that their model can form,

> ... an essential platform for a systematic structurally grounded challenge to the degrading and stigmatising conditions which are the practical manifestations of oppression. On this basis, users and workers can begin to chip away at all forms of inequality that lie at the heart of current oppressive social arrangements ... (p.21)

Their claim is substantiated with reference to concrete examples of practice, in contrast to writing which may be long on analysis but short on prescription. In fact their work exemplifies Freire's emphasis on praxis, the need to hold theory and practice together. The principle can be explained more fully by turning to the notions of 'socially useful theory' (Anyon, 1994) and 'critical social science' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

Table 1: Educational Groupwork

	Activity	Minor Critical Movement	Intended Outcomes	Minor Critical Movement	Conditions
Articulating Propositions	Making statements about social reality so as to distinguish between generative and degenerative themes	From point scoring to exploring ideas	Knowledge Constitutive Interests: Technical - 'authoritative' and universal Practical - particular and local Emancipatory - liberatory intent	From put downs to exploring emotional commitments	Freedom of Discourse: Eliciting voices Supporting argument Sustaining conversations Respecting emotion - protecting rationality
Major Critical Movement			From competitive assertion to collaborative inquiry		
Developing Knowledge	Structured educational process aimed at developing knowledge about the propositions, embracing; experiential, didactic, reflective, elements	Progressive clarification of personal position in relation to issues	Realisation of position and significance for participant re: areas of certainty or uncertainty, awareness of difference, of 'place' in society, shared meanings, grounds for solidarity beyond the group	Progressive revelation of relationship between private troubles and public issues	Commitment to unconstrained communication. Countering inappropriate forms of persuasion and coercion, allows dialectical exploration of points of view
Major Critical Movement			From collaborative inquiry to the desire for collective action		
Taking Action	Propositions redefined. Problem solving approach. The conduct of the struggle: strategies, tactics, roles, resources	Clarifies what can be done	Prudential decision-making by assessing risk in confronting power. Avoiding being defined 'in' or 'out'.	Clarifies what will be done	Achievement of dialogue promotes practical discourse and decision-making. Free commitment to action. Results of action renew learning.

(after Carr and Kemmis, 1986)

Box 1. Some characteristics of Greater Pilton

- a population of 15,500
- only 34% of households with access to a car
- nearly one quarter of households have no bank or building society account
- over 40% of households across the area receive housing benefit
- one of the highest official unemployment rates in Edinburgh at 22%
- 60% unemployment in the 19-24 age bracket
- of those in work a substantial number are in low paid, part-time jobs
- women are twice as likely to be low wage earners than men
- in employment categories, only 5% are managers and 4% professionals
- around 25% of households are single person households
- at 17%, a high proportion of single parent households
- at 53%, local authority housing is the dominant form of tenure
- only 12% of residents stayed on at school after the age of 16
- 46% of residents have no qualifications

According to Anyon (1994, pp.129-30), theoretical understandings are not primarily derived from reference to other theories but from the dialogue between values, vision or goals and current activities. Such understandings do not attempt to provide the whole 'answer' or explanation for a situation. Nor are they ad hoc and only applicable to one locale or one situation with no relevance for anyone else. They seek to connect local activity to wider societal constraints in such a way that people, and those trying to work in this way, identify the direct action to be taken. The primary goal of this activity goes beyond the refinement of concepts to successful action. In short, socially useful theory and educational groupwork attempt to:

- make the connection between local activity and societal constraints
- ensure that what is proposed is actually capable of enactment and identifies direct actions to be taken
- embody the commitment to certain values in the way that things are done
- incorporate the analysis of what happens as a result of action

taken into the theorising process

To develop socially useful theory people need to become 'critical social scientists'; a term coined by Carr and Kemmis (1986) whose work draws heavily on Habermas, '… perhaps the most important sociologist since Max Weber' (Pusey, 1987, p.9). Becoming critical involves articulating propositions, developing knowledge and taking action with certain activities, outcomes and conditions associated with each of the three stages

This article augments their account in three ways. Firstly it highlights the minor movements within and major movements between the stages. These movements are critical because they involve the significant shifts in attitudes which enable individuals and groups to function more rationally and cooperatively. Secondly, attention is drawn to the correspondence between the account and the social action process. Thirdly the ideas are grounded with reference to a project in the Greater Pilton area of Edinburgh, which involved young people between the ages of 14 and 16 in the development of a ~~'declaration of rights'. Box 1 conveys something of the social milieu~~ occupied by the young people.

Stage 1. Articulating propositions: The 'what' phase of social action

The articulation of propositions involves opening up generative themes which are topics significant to the participants, but which also reveal much about relations of power in society. These can be contrasted with degenerative themes which are 'statements uttered with such finality and conviction that the possibility of counter-arguments is severely reduced' (Brookfield, 1987, p.46). An important aim is to distinguish between 'technical', 'practical' and 'emancipatory' truth claims. The first of these involves instrumental, 'scientific' knowledge concerning control over natural objects and processes. Discussion about these claims may centre on establishing and questioning 'facts', the credibility of the source of the claims and the expertise and status of the acknowledged authorities associated with a particular view. The second derives from the self-interpretations

of actors in social situations, and discussion here may centre on clarifying and debating meanings and understandings being brought to bear by those involved. The third refers to the attempt to understand reality in terms of the potential for liberatory activity. Debate here may concern, for example, the best way to help those who are in some way being disadvantaged or marginalised. In terms of the conditions necessary to foster communication and discussion, the fullest possible exploration of the issues requires all voices to be heard; helping people to formulate their arguments; and sustaining conversations. People need to explore the way that they feel as well as think about issues. At the same time rationality is protected by emphasising that claims need to be backed up by evidence and statements need to be logical.

Two minor critical movements must be achieved in this first stage. One allows for the genuine exploration of ideas, as distinct from the desire to score intellectual 'points', and the other allows for the exploration of underlying emotional commitments. Both are necessary if members of the group are to make the major critical shift from competitive assertion to collaborative inquiry, which lays the foundation for stage two.

In broad terms, the processes involved in Stage 1 can be illustrated with reference to the experience of the Pilton young people. In 1995 a group of youth workers began meeting to discuss common issues faced by local agencies and workers. They wanted to develop a common vision, which would be assisted by collaboration and sharing available resources. In 1996 a residential conference began a process of consultation with local young people. Young people were involved during the planning stages and about 40 attended the conference. The conference structure put in place the conditions for focussed discussion and encouraged the participants to make their statements about the nature of social reality as they saw it. It then involved them in establishing and questioning the facts, sorting out their own meanings and understandings, and working out in what ways they were being disadvantaged and why. Having argued about and debated these issues, the young people put together a rudimentary young people's charter, which set out statements based on the needs and perceptions of the young people themselves.

Stage Two. Developing knowledge: The 'why' phase of social action

In Stage 2, the development of knowledge offers new insights especially in relation to the wider organisational, social or political context. Workers would bring into play a structured educational process to enable the participants to learn with and from each other. It would embrace experiential, didactic, and reflective moments as appropriate. The intention is for participants to articulate and realise the significance of their position about issues. Degrees of certainty or uncertainty in relation to what they claim to know and think would become clearer, as would the awareness of areas of conflict, disagreement and consensus. The significance of difference amongst participants, sexual or racial, for example, and of their individual and collective 'place' in society, would also be revealed. It would tease out the extent of shared meanings, the potential for group solidarity around issues and, beyond this, the possibility of solidarity with others in the wider society. The conditions pertaining to this stage necessitate a commitment to unconstrained communication in which inappropriate forms of persuasion, such as brow-beating, and coercion by others claiming a 'superior' understanding, would be challenged in a way which enables a constructive exploration of points of view. This would seek to use conflict and disagreement as a basis for discussion as opposed to seeking an enforced resolution or phoney consensus.

Awareness of group dynamics is essential. Tuckmann's (in Brown, 1992, pp.101-110) characterisation of group development in terms of forming, storming, norming and performing, illustrates how different kinds of interventions are required by the worker at the different phases in the life course of the group. Once again two minor critical movements can be identified; one which entails the progressive clarification of personal positions in relation to issues, and the other entailing the progressive revelation of the relationship between 'private troubles and public issues' (Mills, 1959). The major critical movement resulting from the second stage would be from collaborative inquiry to the desire for collective action, which lays the foundation for stage three.

The processes involved in Stage 2 are revealed in the Pilton case when a small group formed to develop the charter towards a formal

launch in the community. Local youth workers met on a weekly basis with the group and the group worked intensively over a period of 15 months. The process enabled the group to explore ways that young people could exercise more influence in their community and inform the direction of local services. Activities during this time included raising funds, two residential events, and producing a video. These kinds of structured educational activities helped to hone their interpersonal, communication and team-working skills, and to debate and present issues in more systematic ways. Crucially, they learned much about the often negative portrayal of young people in the media. They also learned about the workings of the local state and the exercise of power in local communities. The demands that eventually surfaced in their declaration of rights, such as the right to live without fear of violence on the streets, show that they came to understand that their own situation reflected the generic issues faced by young people in society. The declaration was not just for them but for all young people.

Stage 3. Taking action: Incorporating the 'how', 'action' and 'reflection' phases of social action

Taking action involves planning for and taking achievable action on the basis of the group's deliberations. In this stage the original propositions would have been redefined as a result of the learning process. New understandings of the 'problem' would have been engendered and regarded in such a way that the group comes to see what it might begin to do about this 'problem'. Here the worker would enable the group to work through a systematic problem-solving approach with the aim being clarified, relevant objectives set, responsibilities identified, resources allocated and monitoring and evaluation systems put in place. This would seek to detail the conduct of the struggle to be undertaken. The intention is that the decision making involves a realistic assessment of risk in the actions envisaged. Whilst people can in theory learn from any situation, ones which expose people to catastrophic failure, ridicule or embarrassment are likely to lead to less rather than more engagement in the development process. Where the proposed action requires the group to challenge

power and authority, it is important, as Mathiesen (1980, p.224) argues, to avoid being 'defined in' or 'defined out' by those holding the power. It means that issues need to be taken up in such a way that it is difficult to demonise or stereotype the activists. Finally, new statements about the nature of social reality are articulated based on what the participants have come to understand as a result of their actions and the learning process as a whole.

To support the group's decisions, it is a condition that all participants need to be involved in the practical discourse and give their free commitment to the actions to be taken. The results of the action feeds back to the beginning of the process, when new statements will be made about the nature of social reality, as the group considers what it now knows about the world as a consequence of its thoughts and actions. Within this third stage a further two minor critical movements can be identified, one which clarifies what could be done, and the other which establishes what will be done.

In the Pilton case the young people developed their ability to plan and organise, and to present their ideas to others. They decided to organise a seminar to present the charter, to which they invited a range of key players at local and city wide levels. In the event attendees included representatives of the police, libraries, social services, schools, youth services and the city council. Responsibilities were allocated and tasks completed and the young people were well prepared for the event. On the day a local councillor was enlisted to unveil the charter. The young people took leading roles including introducing speakers, giving inputs and drawing proceedings to a close. The seminar raised important and challenging issues without setting up antagonisms between young people and the police, for example, or between youth services and schools. The issues were presented in a manner which invited those attending to consider their own potential role in bringing about desired change. Following the seminar, the group reflected on the progress that they had made and went on to consider how to develop their work. They decided that the next phase would be to embed the charter in local schools and youth centres.

In the end the group disbanded for a variety of reasons, but one important spin-off from the process was that following the initial conference the workers continued to meet regularly and they

established the Youth Work Action Group in 1997. Since then the group has arranged seminars and conferences to encourage critical reflection on current youth work practice. One outcome was an agenda for change amongst service providers in the local areas on the basis of commonly agreed principles of practice, which were:

• The promotion of good practice
• Developing critical practice
• Accessibility
• Involvement
• Exploration of alternative methods and techniques

Having explained educational groupwork in both theoretical and practical terms, the article now concludes with some thoughts about the value of developing and utilising such frameworks.

The value of frameworks

Building An Active Democracy (Community Learning Scotland, 2001, p.28) suggested that the effective promotion of active citizenship could happen more frequently and to greater effect if workers:

• were better trained
• could measure what they do more effectively
• could draw from a wide range of practice examples
• could better understand the underpinning principles and processes of the work

Frameworks such as the one outlined in this article can assist educators, trainers and staff developers to be clearer about the components of groupwork and in turn to enable more focused learning. Exemplars can also support practitioners in pursuit of good practice and there are useful examples of groupwork in relation to work with young people where active, collective engagement has been achieved. In *Self-Directed Groupwork*, Mullender and Ward (1991, pp.163-166) give two examples of groups of young people, one in the care of a local authority through fostering and residential care, and

the other young teenagers on a council estate suffering from police harassment, who went on to achieve social change on issues identified and owned by the group members themselves.

More recent examples of social action groupwork with young people include: work with young people on health issues in Bradford, (Baker, 1999); youth consultations with young people on estates in London using social action methods (Skinner, Boulton and Smith, 2000); work with young people on play and health issues in Belfast and Derby (Fleming and Keenan, 2000) and social action groupwork with young people who are suicidal and self harming (Green, 2001).

Other detailed accounts of practice can be found in *Social Action for Young People* (1995), where they are bracketed by a useful introduction to and discussion of the importance of this form of work by the book's editor Howard Williamson.

Another important use of frameworks is to enable professionals to explain purposes and methods within and across allied fields such as health, social work, housing, adult education, and youth and community work. It may therefore help to reveal the commonalities in various approaches. Sanderson (1999), in writing about adult education, citizenship and democratic renewal, for example, draws extensively on the same Habermasian analysis that is outlined in this article. Making the nature of educational groupwork explicit reveals connections to other established frameworks and this can help to authenticate and legitimate practice. The version of collective learning presented here, for instance, extends Kolb's (1984) more individualised experiential learning cycle, which is widely understood and appreciated across a range of professional activity. It also connects with the theory and practice of Action Learning (Revans, 1982), which emphasises the power of the group to drive learning which is action-centred. It differs from both of these in its overt concern with social justice issues and its commitment to the values and principles espoused, for example, by feminist commentators on groupwork such as Butler and Wintram (1991). For these reasons educational groupwork fits well with other formulations, such as Kindervatter's *Non Formal Education* (see Kilian, 1999) and Mullender and Ward's (1991) *Self-directed Groupwork,* and the kind of work with small groups promoted by the Centre for Social Action (see *Youth Agenda: A Good practice guide to working with young people on their home ground*,

2000) based at De Montfort University, Leicester (http;//www.dmu. ac.uk/dmucsa).

Conclusion

Hopefully this article has introduced another approach to assist group workers throughout the UK, and perhaps further afield, in developing critical forms of practice such as that embedded in the social action methodology. Workers could use the framework as a template or idealised model against which to analyse their practice and ideas. In doing so they may:

- make their current understandings and perspectives explicit
- identify inconsistencies or incoherence in their ideas or practice
- identify stages of a process
- inform and change practice
- recognise new opportunities for practice
- bring new ideas to bear
- critically examine their work
- be conscious of the link between purpose and practice
- assess outcomes against intentions
- change and extend the framework itself

The kind of social action envisaged here would represent at the micro level, sites of democratic activity in which people attempt to address issues of justice in a rational manner. As such they seek to influence social situations and in so doing make a contribution to the achievement of social justice at the macro level. In the end, therefore, it is about the development of a critically informed and active citizenship.

Note

I would be interested in hearing about examples of practice that fit or extend the framework outlined above. I can be contacted by email at: john.bamber@education.ed.ac.uk.

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