Empowering communities through active learning: challenges and contradictions

Sarah Banks and Tom Vickers

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Key words

Community, community development learning, active citizenship

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This article critically examines a regional programme of community development learning in the context of current UK government policies to develop and engage 'active communities' in neighbourhood and civil renewal. It outlines the positive outcomes of offering focussed community development learning at local level in developing individual confidence and skills and enhancing community networks. It also highlights the limitations of working to individual training/qualifications targets, prescribed outputs and pre-defined curricula in terms of achieving 'active communities' that are either fit for community governance or for more radical collective action for social change.

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Introduction: the active community

UK government policy is increasingly seeking to create, mobilise and use active communities in the process of governance, service delivery and as a means of re-moralising and renewing civil society (see, for example, Chanan, 2004; Communities Scotland, 2005; Home Office, 2004a; Scottish Office, 2002; Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). By 'active community' we mean formal and informal organisations, groups and networks that exist in neighbourhoods or that are formed around common interests and identities. The term 'active' emphasises the fact that these organisations, groups or networks are involved in activities of mutual interest or for the collective good. If 'community' implies a sense of belonging, solidarity and significance amongst its members (which might be described as latent 'social capital'), the '*active* community' is about mobilising this social capital.
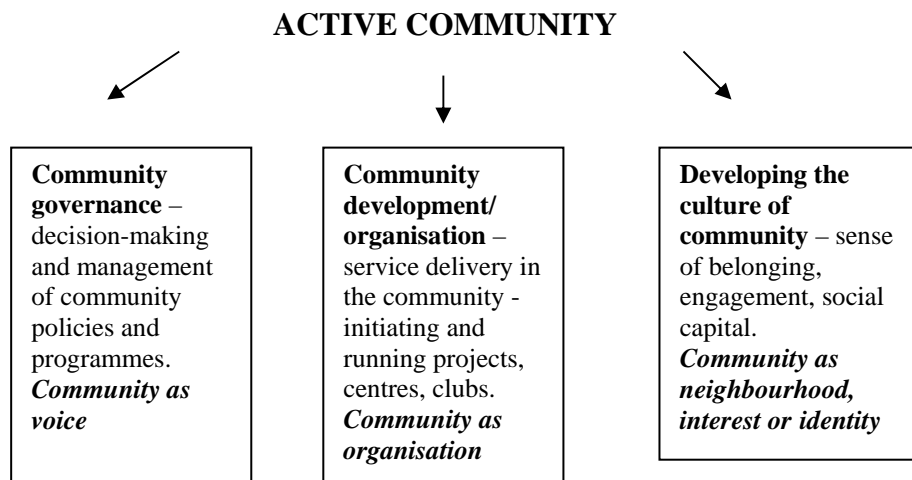
Recent experience, particularly in the field of neighbourhood regeneration, has led to a growing recognition that the involvement of local residents and community organisations in decision-making, service delivery and communal activities requires a certain level of motivation, commitment, knowledge and skills (see, for example, Anastacio et al., 2000; Purdue et al., 2000). Increasingly the term 'community capacity building' is being used to refer to the work that needs to go into equipping people and groups for this engagement, and community development (as a broader process that encompasses capacity building) is being recognised as an integral part of these policies and programmes (Banks & Shenton, 2001; Duncan & Thomas, 2000; Skinner & Wilson, 2002). By 'community development' we mean a process that involves: 'building active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect.' (Standing Conference for Community Development, 2001, p. 5)

In the context of these New Labour policies, particularly in the areas of neighbourhood and civil renewal, community development (with a focus on capacity building) entails at least three elements, which are listed below and depicted in Figure 1.

1. Enabling some local residents, usually people who are active in organisations in their neighbourhoods or communities of interest or identity, to have a voice in planning and *decision-making* and in the management of programmes and projects. This has gained recent impetus from regeneration programmes, which may involve capacity building for a specific purpose (to engage in partnerships, for example).

2. Building the knowledge, skills and confidence of individual residents and members of community organisations to enable them to develop their neighbourhoods or communities of interest/identity through being able to assess needs, initiate projects, bid for funding and run projects. This could be categorised as the initiation and *delivery of services* in a broad sense. This has always been part of the generic community development process, but has gained a renewed impetus through the recent government policies in many fields, ranging from crime reduction to services for children and young people.

3. Developing 'community spirit' and 'social capital', including a sense of collective responsibility, coherence and belonging, which may result in people being able and willing to engage in the policy process, service delivery, to help neighbours or vote in national and local elections. This is the particular focus of the civil renewal agenda and entails the development of a broader *culture of community,* often with an emphasis on developing responsible citizens.

Figure 1: Developing the active community

ACTIVE COMMUNITY

Community governance – decision-making and management of community policies and programmes. *Community as voice*	**Community development/ organisation** – service delivery in the community - initiating and running projects, centres, clubs. *Community as organisation*	**Developing the culture of community** – sense of belonging, engagement, social capital. *Community as neighbourhood, interest or identity*

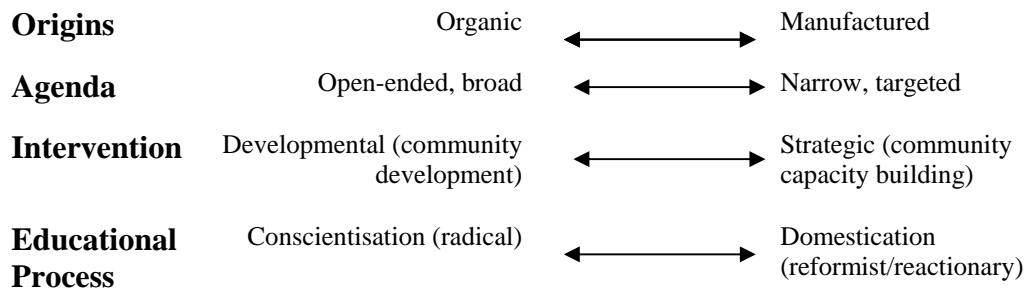**The active community: critical responses**

Many long-standing community development practitioners and academics welcome the recognition by central government of the importance of involving local residents and members of community groups in decision-making and the need to support the process of developing active communities. Indeed, some have become involved as civil servants, advisors and consultees in the development of policies and initiatives (particularly in the Active Communities Directorate of the Home Office) and many have been involved in bidding for funding and implementing these policies in practice. Nevertheless, there is also an inevitable wariness, as the state appears to be attempting to 'manufacture' community organisations (such as community partnerships) fit for its own purpose of governance and to develop active citizens with desirable moral qualities to fit its particular brand of third way communitarianism. As Hodgson (2004, p. 144) comments, there a is fine line between nurturing and stifling,

noting that 'civil society groups are increasingly being stifled through being forced to work towards a bureaucratic mandate laid down by the state'.

Community development work as an intervention designed to support, stimulate and develop active communities has always moved between the role of releasing potential to enable groups to develop according to their own agendas, and funnelling, channelling or directing the formation and work of community groups and organisations in line with workers', employers' or state agendas (see, for example, Banks, 2003; Batten, 1967; Kenny, 2002; London to Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980). But in the current policy context of neighbourhood and civil renewal, more tightly controlled governance, funding and accountability regimes are forcing the manufacture of some community groups (for example, community partnerships) and burdening these and others with bureaucratic requirements emanating from central government.

The nature of the active community being stimulated or developed through these policies can be regarded as being on a continuum from organic to manufactured. The process of support (capacity building or community development) may range from working to a broad open-ended agenda to a more focused, targeted and narrow agenda. We noted in an earlier article (Banks and Shenton, 2001) the increasing emphasis on community capacity building in the context of regeneration programmes, distinguishing a gradual developmental approach recognisable as community development from a strategic approach amounting to capacity building for a particular purpose. The community development/capacity building process can range along a continuum from conscientisation (developing critical political consciousness) to domestication (acceptance of the status quo), to use the terminology of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972, 1993; Hope et al., 1994; Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989; Ledwith, 1997). These different dimensions of the active community are outlined in Figure 2. It should be emphasised that these different aspects do not always move together along the continua. For example, the organic active community is not necessary radical in its outlook, process or outcomes. Indeed, it may be extremely reactionary.

Figure 2: Dimensions of the active community

Origins	Organic	⟷	Manufactured
Agenda	Open-ended, broad	⟷	Narrow, targeted
Intervention	Developmental (community development)	⟷	Strategic (community capacity building)
Educational Process	Conscientisation (radical)	⟷	Domestication (reformist/reactionary)

The Empowering Communities Programme as a case study

This article will examine a programme of work undertaken in the North East of England, the Empowering Communities Programme (ECP), as an example of one approach to developing active communities. It had a specific focus on community development learning, it evolved out of a long tradition of training for community activists, was funded through a regeneration programme with specific targets and outputs, and demonstrates some of the advantages, disadvantages, tensions and dilemmas of developing structured approaches to learning with a focus on community development.

The ECP also has particular relevance for the recent civil renewal policy agenda, which has been characterised as a way: 'to empower people in their communities to provide the answers to our contemporary social problems' (Home Office, 2004a, p. 32). As part of this policy, the role of the voluntary and community sector in offering education and learning for people who are or who may become active in their communities has been specifically acknowledged, with a special report and programme of work on 'active learning for active citizenship' (Home Office, 2004b). It is recognised that the idea is not new, and that there is a long history of formal and informal education that equips people directly and indirectly to play a more active role in their local neighbourhoods and communities of interest or identity. However, featuring this theme at the heart of central government policy gives prominence to the work that is already taking place, stimulates further developments and may encourage more formalised, targeted and measured approaches to learning in the community.

Outline of the Empowering Communities Programme

The Empowering Communities Programme was a regional scheme designed to promote and accredit community development learning. The term 'community development learning' within this context refers to learning that equips people to become active in neighbourhoods and communities of interest and identity to work together to bring about change that is of collective benefit (learning for community development). It also covers learning that people gain through the process of involvement in community activity (learning through community development).

The ECP was funded in 2001 for three years principally through the Single Regeneration Budget 6 programme of the regional development agency (One NorthEast). These regeneration monies were designed to promote economic, physical and social development in the region within the framework of a regional economic strategy (One NorthEast, 1999). Economic targets, in terms of jobs or training leading to jobs, therefore, were highlighted in the ECP, as well as its contribution to community capacity building to enable local residents to take part in regeneration partnerships (community governance). The inclusion of economic targets immediately added an individual-focused dimension to the programme. For those involved in developing the ECP (largely people who had a background in community development work), it was taken for granted that the programme was about community development/organisation and developing the culture of community. The ECP had emerged from a long history of community development learning nationally and in North East England, based within a community development value framework with a strong emphasis on collective action for social change (see Federation of Community Work Training Groups, 2001; Federation of Community Work Training Groups & Association of Metropolitan Authorities, 1990; Morris, 1985). The targets and outputs set for the ECP, however, did not directly capture these values and purposes (see Table 1).

The specific aims of the ECP were to enable the provision of locally delivered training courses and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in community development work across the North East of England and to develop an infrastructure

to support this. The programme was built around the National Occupational Standards for Community Development Work, which outline the values, knowledge and skills required for community development work as an occupation and define various levels of competence in line with the system of National Vocational Qualifications (Paulo, 2003). Members of the Community Work Assessment Consortium for North East England (CWACNEE), the organisation that was at the heart of the ECP, had been involved in the development of these standards over a period of ten years and were already using them on a small scale.

The work of the ECP involved: preparing materials for a 10-week 'learning about community work course'; doing outreach and development work to find and support groups/areas where courses or qualifications were needed; allocating funding to these local groups; training tutors for the courses; training mentors and assessors to work with individuals on their NVQs; and the provision of an assessment centre. The programme was ambitious and complex, and was run by a large partnership of organisations from the voluntary, community, statutory and higher education sectors with a budget of over one million pounds.

An evaluation of the achievements and challenges of this programme provides useful insights into some of the issues facing initiatives designed to promote community development learning. Ongoing evaluation was built in to the ECP, with an evaluator employed by Durham University participating in the management committee meetings and feeding back the results of her findings over the three-year period. The final evaluation report (Harley, 2004) gives an overview of the processes, outputs and challenges of the programme as a whole. This article will focus particularly on participants' experience of the learning and qualification programmes, drawing on the data collected for the evaluation from the monitoring statistics and internal documents, observations of training courses, interviews and questionnaires with participants, and three additional case studies in different parts of the region undertaken after the end of the programme using focus groups and in-depth interviews. We will not cover the complex infrastructure surrounding the programme as a whole - the partnership, its management structure, the workings of the outreach and development team, training fund, the preparation of the tutors, assessors and mentors and the establishment of an assessment centre, details of which are given in the evaluation report (Harley, 2004).

Table 1: The main outputs of the Empowering Communities Programme

	Forecast outputs	Actual Outputs (by 30.03.04)
'Learning about Community Work' training weeks	57	242
People registered for NVQ	267	125
People gaining NVQ units	65	32
People achieving NVQ qualifications	190	30
People registered for assessor training	60	63
People gaining assessor qualifications	40	18
Mentoring courses run	9	12
Mentors trained	60	60
'Training the trainers' training weeks	51	84
Trainers trained	32	53
Residents accessing employment	37	26
Capacity building initiatives supported	29	41
Voluntary organisations supported	42	67
Training fund applications supported	60	60
'Learning about Community Work' material written	1	1
Training the trainers learning pack completed	1	1
Mentoring learning materials written	1	1

Table 1, which shows the main outputs of the programme (compared with the forecast outputs in the original funding bid) gives an impression of the range of work undertaken. The most successful element of the programme was the delivery of the learning about community work courses, and the associated development work and networking that went with this, which was undertaken by an outreach and development team and through partners. During the three years of the programme the team supported or facilitated themselves more than 40 courses with approximately 400 participants across the region. The number of training weeks achieved was 242, compared with a forecast of 57 weeks. This demonstrates both the demand for community development work learning and the accessibility of the training courses, which were locally tailored and delivered. The most challenging element of the programme was the recruitment, retention and assessment of individual participants

registering for an NVQ. 125 people registered for the NVQ (compared with a forecast of 267), of which only 30 had achieved the qualification by the end of the programme (compared with a forecast of 190). There was also a shortfall in people gaining assessor qualifications (18 people qualified). The number of residents accessing employment was recorded as 26, but it is difficult to measure the direct and indirect impact of the learning about community work courses on employability, as so many other factors contribute to people gaining or changing jobs. The evaluation report records other quantifiable outputs, but those in Table 1 are the most significant. The difficulties in measuring impact in quantitative terms meant that a major part of the evaluation involved the collection of qualitative data, on which the rest of the article is based.

Learning about community work courses: the content and approach

The 10-week learning about community work courses were based on a programme and set of materials already developed by CWACNEE (Community Work Assessment Consortium North East England) and refined during the ECP. The courses were either delivered by local tutors (some of whom had undertaken the Training the Trainers course) or by members of the outreach and development team. Although there was a week-by-week programme and set of materials for the courses, these could be varied according to local need and tutor preferences. The topics covered are listed below, taken from the course pack for tutors (Roberts, 2001, p. 1):

1. *Introduction to the Community Work Course* – establishing the group; putting this learning in the context of community work and assessment.
2. *Contributing to effective relationships in the community* – skills and knowledge in developing collaborative relationships between individuals, groups and organisations.
3. *Basis for action* – how practical organisations begin to meet the needs of a community.
4. *Social inclusion and equality (1) power* – exploration of power exercised by individuals and groups.

5. *Social inclusion and equality (2) discrimination* – exploration of policies and processes contributing to 'social exclusion'; feelings and behaviour arising from personal experiences of powerlessness.

6. *Assisting community groups to prioritise needs, rights and objectives* – taking account of wider community benefit and setting aims and objectives for group action.

7. *Groups working together* – how groups work and their role in developing community work.

8. *Assisting collective action* – how workers can assist groups to take, review and evaluate collective action.

9. *Contribute to the effectiveness of the workflow* – gaining knowledge and understanding about being effective and efficient with what has to be done.

10. *Arranging an event* – aspects of planning a successful event..

The courses were grounded in the philosophy and principles of community development work learning that had been developed incrementally over several decades by the Federation for Community Development Learning (formerly Federation of Community Work Training Groups). As mentioned earlier, this was based on the values of community development, with a focus on promoting equality, social justice and participation through a process of shared learning. The Training the Trainers Manual (University of Sunderland, 2004), which outlines the training offered to people who were to act as tutors on the courses, is based on an approach to learning that is experiential, participative and action-oriented. This fits with the philosophy of the Federation for Community Development Learning (FCWTGs, 2001, p. 11), which emphasises a concern with participants sharing experiences and learning from each other. The course pack includes significant use of case study material, designed to be relevant to day-to-day experiences in community development work, and trainers were encouraged to use role play and small group work.

CWACNEE adopted a set of principles to underpin its community development learning practices (see Harley, 2004, p. 64), which included basing the processes of learning on:

- Building the confidence of its learners;

- Learning based around the life experiences and contexts of learners;
- Enquiry based learning;
- Reflective learning;
- A critical pedagogy.

Whilst not outlining a theoretical perspective on learning, these documents are clearly rooted in an approach that sees the people taking the courses as active participants in their own learning, and is concerned that the outcomes should contribute towards a community development process that is 'key to reviving local economies and communities' (FCWTGs, 2001, p. 6). There is also a strong strand in the CWACNEE statement (Harley, 2004, p. 64) that gives a commitment to enabling learners to gain recognition for their learning, including that learning programmes should be focused on the National Occupational Standards, nationally recognised and provide progression routes. So the courses were serving a number of purposes, of which three are identified below, alongside what we see as the dimensions of the active community on which they are based (see Figure 2):

1. *community development* - fostering community development and collective action in a neighbourhood (organic, open-ended, developmental, radical/reformist);
2. *individual qualifications* - providing a foundation for individual learners to begin programmes of accredited learning with qualifications attached (manufactured, targeted);
3. *routes to employment* - enabling individuals to progress into employment or to take roles on regeneration partnerships and boards (narrow, strategic).

Whilst all these purposes could be achieved to a limited extent, it was a difficult task to balance the fostering of community development values and critical awareness necessary for the first purpose, alongside the focus on individual learners and qualifications and the aim to enable people to gain skills specifically designed for employability. Indeed, Johnston and Coare (2003, p. 199) warn against , 'over-reliance on "technicist", individualised , often accredited, methods and approaches' within community-based education as leading to a situation where the original ends no longer matter.

Learning about community work courses: the participants

It was originally intended that a majority of participants on the courses would be community activists – that is, people working voluntarily in their own communities. However, the majority of the 250 participants for whom employment status was recorded were employed (70%) and 87% were educated to NVQ level 2 or above. These participants were either undertaking paid work in the community (not community development work) or were working as unqualified community development workers.   29% of those for whom qualifications were recorded had qualifications at NVQ level 4 or 5 (degree level and above). A 10% sample of the database, which surveyed 25 individuals in more depth, revealed that the graduates were people who either needed a further qualification to find work, or to progress within their work. 10% of those participants who gave ethnic origins were from black and minority ethnic groups, which is higher than the 2.4% of the population of the north east recorded in the 2001 census and reflects the specific efforts made by the ECP and the outreach team.

The 10-week course was designed to enable individual participants to progress to take the NVQ in community work, if they desired. Approximately 125 participants were registered and taking units by the end of the programme, although far fewer people had gained their qualifications by the end of the programme than anticipated. Working on the NVQ involved working with trained 'workplace' assessors and a mentor systematically to give evidence of competence in relation to the National Occupation Standards for Community Development Work.

Positive outcomes for participants

The evaluation of the ECP involved interviewing a 10% sample from the database of course participants in 2003 about their learning experiences. The sample comprised 25 people and was designed to gather opinions and experiences from a cross section of participants based on geographical location, age, gender, ethnicity and previous educational qualifications. An additional follow-up study was also undertaken four months after the programme ended in 2004 with 16 key people (course participants,

NVQ candidates, tutors, assessors and mentors) in three case study areas. The areas were selected to cover a variety of neighbourhoods and participants. One was a course designed for black and minority ethnic participants in a large city; one covered residents on an estate on the edge of a small city; and the other was based in a town. Several of these people played multiple roles (such as course participant and NVQ candidate; tutor, mentor and assessor) or had moved from one role to another (for example, from course participant to mentor, from volunteer community worker to paid worker).

Participants reported a wide range of beneficial outcomes as a result of undertaking the 10-week course and/or NVQ, including the development of increased self-awareness, self-confidence and focus in their work; the possibility of moving into new jobs; and broader benefits derived from extended networks. Some of the main themes emerging from the interviews are listed below.

1. ***Enabling people to recognise and name their work*** – several participants commented on how the course helped them to locate and recognise what they were doing already in terms of work in the community and to give it a name, for example:

> What the Empowering Communities course taught me was that actually the things that I was doing had a name, and processes and mechanisms that I used actually had a basis in theory. So it reinforced a lot of what I did, and it made me much more confident (participant/community development worker, H).

> As an individual you may learn very little new ways. But what you have done by explaining what you do, and sharing the knowledge from somebody else, you've actually crystallised your own involvement in that… that you now have a better understanding of why you do something in a certain way. So we've all learnt really (participant/NVQ candidate/councillor and community worker, A).

> I knew all the stuff but it just gives you another perspective, and you think 'oh, well I was doing it anyway, but that's why I was doing it' (assessor/community development worker, K).

These accounts suggest that involvement in the ECP learning programmes played a role for participants in making their community development work more conscious and systematic.

2. Helping people to focus their work more clearly - Many participants talked about the way the ECP developed their understanding of community development and of political and organisational processes, and how this allowed them to focus their work more effectively. As one community activist commented:

> my involvement is now much larger, but it's also more targeted, and my understanding of why it needs to be targeted is much more informed.

3. Recognising skills gaps and filling them – Respondents reported that the ECP helped people to identify gaps in their existing knowledge and skills. This in turn helped people to acquire the skills necessary to move in the direction they wished. In just the small selection of people consulted during the follow-up research, there were people moving into paid community development work from volunteering, administration, librarianship and academic backgrounds. For all of them the ECP played a role in the transition. For many people gaining confidence in new areas was key to them changing their roles, and for some participants the course had broadened horizons and made participants aware of new possibilities and ways of working*:*

> I would have stayed in here [the centre], and I would have carried on volunteering, till I was bored of volunteering, and then I would have just stayed at home, or done something, but I wouldn't have gone out into this community, because I didn't know this community, and it's through doing the course that we learnt what questions to ask people (participant/NVQ candidate/community worker E).

> It's given me confidence to apply for this job and get this job (participant/NVQ candidate/community development worker B).

In addition to facilitating people in changing roles, for some the ECP helped them to explore their existing role more fully, as one community worker commented in relation to the NVQ:

> I suppose that's what the NVQ's about, it's about providing the skills for people actually doing the work. I think actually in lots of situations when people are learning they don't always realise that they've identified a gap in their own learning, and I think a lot of people realised that they had a gap in their own skill-base through that little window, so in that way it was quite successful (participant/community worker, D).

4. Boosting confidence generally – in addition to the specific cases where ECP participants had gained the skills and confidence to move on (particularly by changing jobs), some reported a rise in confidence in general. As these course participants commented:

> I know that I'm much better at doing the job that I do, both as a councillor and as a worker within [name of Community Association], because of the training I've received and the confidence that you build from that network. I know I can pick up a phone and I can find out something that I need to know, and I could find out today (participant/NVQ candidate/community worker and councillor, A).

> But I think it's been good for me personally, it's developed me personally, because I was never a very outgoing person, I prefer to sit in the office and do the work and get on with it. But now I've got a bit more confidence to go into a room full of people – although I still dread it, getting up and talking in front of people, I still can't do that, I'm useless at that, or I think I am – but I can do it better, I couldn't have done that a few years ago (participant/NVQ candidate/community development worker, B).

> I think all of us are now able to go out into the community and ask questions, and speak to people …… we could go out and talk to people that before, lots of people here would have avoided (participant/NVQ candidate/community worker, E).

5. Developing networks – Contacts within and across different sectors which were developed during the 10-week course were sustained afterwards, and were of positive use to participants in their work:

> When I started doing more development work myself I knew those names…If I'd wanted to contact those organisations I could have gone to that name and said 'do you remember me from the course?', and that gives a whole foot in the door (participant/community development worker, B)

> We're all fighting for the same money but we do work together quite well. We've just got some funding to run a project with a consortium of six voluntary groups (participant/assessor/community development worker, D)

6. Community impact – Course participants' enthusiasm about the learning that they achieved was reported to have spread to the rest of the community:

> They could go out and take [the learning] to other people, or other people who just sit in the café. And they could go out and say 'Well did you know that you can …?' or 'What do you think about setting this up, this is what we have to do to do it?' (participant/NVQ candidate/community worker, E).

The enthusiasm created among participants seems to have played a role in attracting new members to the courses. As one of the tutors commented: 'because of the positive experience we probably could have rolled it out four or five times'. It has also been used as a tool for workers to refer back to when working together with other participants, in order to further develop people's consciousness: 'I could use what I learnt on the Empowering Communities Programme to continue to empower my community through reminding them of what they'd learnt' (participant/community development worker, H).

The benefits identified above are generally in terms of promoting community development/organisation and the culture of community and individual career development. Little direct evidence was given at this point of residents moving onto regeneration partnership boards, local strategic partnerships or other forms of community governance, although there are now signs of this in several areas.

Tensions and challenges

Many of those involved in the ECP learning programmes also reported difficulties and challenges. These related particularly to the balancing of individual and community benefits and the need for flexibility in tailoring learning to individual and local needs. One issue that was not drawn out by participants, but which became obvious to the authors of this article, was the limited evidence of a critical perspective on community development. The main issues we identified are discussed briefly below.

1. Individual versus collective development – as reported above, many of the direct benefits of taking the course or the NVQ accrue at the individual level. This may have an impact on other people or a community or neighbourhood as a whole. However, several respondents reported that some course participants developed and moved on very rapidly, whilst the rest of the community did not, leading to a degree of isolation of community activists. This suggests a need for courses to be more sensitively embedded in wider community development processes.

> We've moved on. We got a bit of training and we've got a bit of confidence behind us, but we haven't always done the estate itself any favours. What we've done, is to try and build the building up, which has not always gone down well (participant/community activist, E).

> They [people who had done the course] were coming in with a new thought process and with some more knowledge, and still hitting the wall of a community who weren't necessarily moving with them (tutor/community development worker, F).

People's experience of participating in the NVQ part of the programme was also often one of isolation, with very individual as opposed to group styles of learning, faciltation and reflection, particularly compared to the 10-week course:

> I think group work and group involvement would…stimulate motivation. That's pretty much why I don't like it [the NVQ], because I find myself in a big hole, a dreary hole, and I think 'stuff this, I'd rather go back to my desk and do some work' (participant/community development worker, P).

2. Dangers of inflexibility and formalisation – the NVQ was felt by many respondents to have severe limitations in other respects too. A qualified community

worker, who had also acted as a course tutor, NVQ assessor and mentor reported finding the use of the National Occupational Standards for community development work 'difficult and repetitive as a process in terms of the qualification, and to some degree ticky-boxy'. He felt that it was a very time-consuming process and it might have been a better use of time and resources to put on more 10-week courses. The fact that it is geared to assessing people in their current workplaces (as paid or volunteer workers) makes it more difficult for people who do not work in community work settings to take the qualification. It also focuses on current contexts and horizons, and so does not broaden people's outlooks or test their skills in new arenas.

There was a general feeling about the courses and the NVQ that there was a need for flexibility, and that learning opportunities needed to be geared to local needs. Participants described a high degree of flexibility in the way the 10-week course was delivered, as one assessor/community development worker commented: 'you could do it in a field, you could do it anywhere, you could do it in a caravan'. However, they also discussed the drawbacks resulting from trying to make a course designed as part of a regional programme relevant to local situations and individual participants, especially for those at an early stage of their community involvement. In some areas a 10-week course may be too long. In others, a range of options might need to be offered. As two respondents commented:

> You can just say: 'Oh, we're catering for the needs of the Pakistani community here'. Within the Pakistani community there's huge differences. You take the Bengali community, within that there's communities, and even if you take the community around us, the host community, you've got communities within communities …. Everyone has different needs, everyone's an individual and delivery needs to be flexible in that (Assessor/ Community Centre Coordinator, N).

> From my perspective it needs more fundamental introductory-type stuff before moving into qualification stuff, because qualifications on [name of estate] - there's another 28 things people think about before qualifications in that type of area. Food, children, warmth, they all come in there before qualifications,

because they had to struggle through school some of these people (Community Worker/Tutor/Assessor, F).

*3. **Dangers of locating shortcomings in the community*** – whilst the ECP learning programmes clearly gave individuals more skills, knowledge and confidence to engage with existing formal structures, such as local authorities, little evidence emerged from the interviews of the development of participants' critical abilities to question existing structures or ideologies. Although several course participants could recount acute experiences of the problems of becoming 'part of the establishment' (assessor/community development worker, D), and seeing workers attempting to empower the community actually create greater dependency, for most there did not seem to be a very developed understanding behind these experiences, and for some the view of community development was totally unproblematic:

> I think in principle everyone understands what community work is, which is just helping the community in any manner you can ….. My understanding of it is that it's really to fix the shortcomings or flaws within the community, fix in the sense that we support them, we encourage them, we advance them, we direct them and refer them, and really it's helping somebody get to the level playing field (NVQ candidate/community development worker, I).

The issues identified above centre around the tendency towards individualisation of elements of the programme, the risks of imposing an externally-generated framework for community development learning and an uncritical approach to the analysis of social problems – all of which were at odds with the community development process and values apparently espoused by the programme.

Conclusions

This case study of community development learning demonstrates the benefits, complexities and difficulties of engaging in this kind of work. There is no doubt that the community work learning opportunities offered through the Empowering Communities Programme enabled participants to improve their community work skills and career prospects. However, whilst the programme was initially targeted at

community activists and volunteers, the majority of participants were paid workers, many of whom were unqualified community workers. This demonstrates both the need for learning and qualifications amongst existing paid community workers and the difficulties in reaching the activists and volunteers (see Glenn et al., 2004).

Recent research undertaken by Williams (2005) suggests that the drive to equip people in the most deprived neighbourhoods with the skills and competence to participate in formal community organisations may be inappropriate. He argues, using evidence from the General Household Survey, that the participatory culture of relatively deprived neighbourhoods and social groups tends towards one-to-one aid (such as helping neighbours), rather than joining local organisations. Williams suggests that greater recognition and value needs to be given to what he calls 'informal' community involvement (see also Burns, Williams & Windebank, 2004, pp. 127-8; Taylor, 2002, pp. 75-77). This would imply that community capacity building should focus more on developing community as neighbourhood, rather than community as organisation (see Figure 1) and on supporting/developing organic as opposed to manufactured groups.

This point is echoed in a recent article by Peel (2003), who argues that the current intense focus on community capacity building and collective outcomes may be ignoring the diversity of individuals' learning styles, needs and experiences. She calls on community learning programmes to take account of the individual's life-world ('where they are and how they see themselves') as this will affect how they interpret the value of participation (Peel, 2003, p. 73-4). These findings confirm the points made by our interview respondents and other commentators (Coare, 2003, p. 48) suggesting that the push to formalise learning through using occupational standards, and the drive to link learning directly with training for employment can have the effect of standardising and prescribing outcomes that may not always fit with the needs of individuals or the communities of which they are a part.

However, whilst there is some validity in the arguments presented by Williams and Peel, there is a danger, if we accept the logic of their conclusions, that community development learning programmes of the type reported here become more individualised, moving even further from their radical collective roots. 'Community'

then becomes a location for learning opportunities rather than a site of collective activity. Whilst flexibility and responsiveness to local needs are important (McGivney, 2000, p. 9-11; White, 2002), this should not necessarily entail losing the radical and political elements in community development learning for citizen action. On the contrary, the more we can move away from the prescriptive standards and sets of competencies and root the learning in the current issues and cultures of the neighbourhoods and communities of identity and interest, then the more likely it is that practical community action will develop. The conscientisation process outlined by Freire (1972) and others who follow his approach is about raising awareness of structural problems that can be tackled through collective efforts. This kind of active citizenship may take considerable time to develop, but it is at the heart of the long-standing radical tradition in community development work which aims to bring about politically active citizens (see Martin, 1999; Shaw & Martin, 2000), rather than economically useful workers or token participants on local partnership boards.

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