Inspired by Freire: From Literacy to Community. How the Ideas of Paulo Freire Shaped Work in the UK

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Abstract

This article reviews the adult literacy campaign in the 1970s in the United Kingdom (UK) and the influence of Paulo Freire's thinking on how we worked. We argue that much adult literacy provision had been designed to 'domesticate' rather than 'liberate'. The mid-1970s 'Right to Read' campaign in the UK rejected this approach (BAS, 1974). The use by tutors of the language and the experience of learners led in part to the publication of student writing, creating reading materials and approaches that were different, and challenging to existing power structures. Emancipatory adult literacy work could not withstand the arrival of substantial government funding in 2001, which brought a new Skills for Life government strategy, together with new teacher-training, new standards and literacy qualifications. Also, in the 1970s and 1980s progressive educators and the institutions for whom they worked developed initiatives which focused on under-represented and marginalised groups, asking 'who isn't there, and what can be done about it?' The result was a renewed development of outreach work, better understanding of what helps and hinders participation, and improved progression routes for individuals. One aspect of this development flowed directly from the literacy work in the 1970s – the participation of volunteers as 'fellow learners'. Looking at educational work with older people in care homes, volunteers from among local university students acted as co-learners in a charity which illustrates Putnam's (2000, p.134) 'generalised reciprocity'. We consider how Freire's legacy emerges among voluntary action as much as it does in literacy programmes.

Keywords: Adult Literacy, Paulo Freire, Volunteering, Volunteers, Outreach Work, Widening Participation, Later Life Learning

Adult Literacy

Literacy has been a site of struggle in Britain for hundreds of years (Howard, 2012). On the whole the established order has been in favour of teaching reading, so that people could follow written instructions and read improving texts. Dissenters have been more passionate about writing – to encourage people to share their own versions of reality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these differences of focus recur in more recent UK literacy campaigns.

Both of our working lives have been centrally affected by our experience in the community-led adult literacy campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, and by the influence of Freire's ideas on our practice. There were two substantial government campaigns in England and Wales: a series of largely short-term initiatives, responding to civil society pressure, from the mid-1970s, and the 'Skills for Life' strategy from 2001-2012 (Hamilton et al. 2000). The 'Skills for Life' campaign derived from the activist lifelong learning policies of a Labour government, and to the findings of the Moser Report it commissioned (Moser, 1999). We both started working with adults wanting to strengthen their literacy and numeracy in the mid-1970s, at the time of the British Association of Settlements' 1973 'Right to Read' campaign, and just before the BBC's prime time 1975 television literacy series, *On the Move*, which made Bob Hoskins a star (BAS, 1974; Hamilton et al. 2000). Just as we began, Penguin published *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, and *Cultural action for freedom* (Freire, 1974a; 1974b), which we devoured.

There had of course been adult literacy provision in Britain before the 1970s, in the Army during and after both World Wars. A report to Parliament in December 1943, for example, noted that just under one and a quarter % of men enlisted in the Army were illiterate, and 'continued to be a drag on the Army, and on themselves, unable to read orders, to make the simplest application or report, or to correspond with their families' (Shawyer, 1944, p.75).

Women with basic skills needs were unable to enlist at all. From 1942 the Army made systematic provision for six to eight weeks' full-time study in dedicated centres, targeting '*the most intelligent*' of each intake of Army personnel with basic skills needs. Shawyer noted:

> A quite surprising number claim to have attended an ordinary school for the full nine years. A smaller number never attended at all, the majority of these being the sons of gypsies, circus performers and other 'travellers' […] the largest call of illiterates, however, has some history of illness (1944, p.79).

Whilst the Army continued to make some provision after 1945, outside the Services provision was bleak, and providers' attitudes bleaker. First there was precious little on offer and this remained the case right up to the 1975 campaign. Characteristically, students joined classes ranging from 13 to 35 students, signed in on arrival and waited in turn for the tutor to see students for five or 10 minutes each. Reading material, such as the *Out with Tom* 'adult' readers offered simplified texts with child-like story lines. The National Association for Remedial Education (NARE), which represented teachers, had low expectations of success for students who were seen as problem learners, and of limited ability:

> The personal immaturity, insecurity and impairment of social development associated with adult literacy is reflected in the number of men and women who either marry later or fail to marry […] [Lack] of intelligence can be assumed to be a major factor associated with reading disability in adults. That about half of the students attending classes are deemed to be 'clearly of low intelligence' suggests that the community is always likely to include some persons of limited intellectual capacity who may nevertheless be functioning at or near their level of potential, even though reading and writing levels are sufficiently low to cause some personal embarrassment (NARE, 1971, pp.4-6).

Difficulties with literacy were seen, then, as a feature of personal aptitude. Such attitudes to learners were not uncommon. The 1970s campaign, emerging largely from the voluntary sector, consciously rejected a model of literacy work built on negative stereotypes – '*Blaming the Victim*', as Jane Mace described it in a memorable article (Mace, 1975). Or, as Sue Shrapnel (later Gardener) put it, '*My students seem to me to* ***have*** *problems not to* ***be*** *problems*' (Shrapnel, 1974). The British campaign emerged first in social work settlements, using social work models of one to one teaching. Clear that literacy was not a social problem to be managed but a political issue, concerning the right to learn, and to be heard, Shrapnel wrote, 'The political approach […] sees the student as a person wronged and deprived, not as a backwards person':

> The social work approach […] implies the inadequacy of the student (by criteria only defined as 'social'); it sees the teacher's job as adjustment; it risks expecting little learning and settling for the performance of limited tasks; it risks also fostering dependence and reinforcing the student's vision of himself as inferior. It also […] implies indifference to the nature of the teaching material as long as it does the job (what job?) and so tolerance of

> childish stuff; acceptance of the […] remedial – that is to say, hole-patching – nature of present provision; and a wholesale belief in the professional's competence to solve the problem. It needs no search for structures other than the carefully protected class or one-to-one pair, because the student's deference and isolation are not, in this view, part of his problem, though his confidence may be (Shrapnel, 1974 cited in Mace, 1979, pp.26-27).

Mace, who worked at the ground-breaking literacy scheme at Cambridge House settlement in London, concurred:

> As tutors, we have no right merely to offer a second chance, a repeat performance of the teacher- pupil model that has already failed […] We have to shed the idea of knowing teacher versus ignorant student […] It means above all learning how to listen […] to give value and literate dress to an oral culture we have forgotten how to appreciate (Mace, 1975, cited in Mace,1979, p.28).

This approach was one shared by the adult education sites in which both the authors of this paper worked. Excited by Freire's work, we struggled at first to see how the pedagogical method for building codes could be translated to a language which lacked syllabic regularity and where phonics seemed an impassable gateway. We were helped by Cynthia Brown's practical booklet expounding Freire's method, *Literacy in thirty hours* (Brown, 1975).

The connection between Freire's work and the development of an approach that used the language and the experience of the learners was at first difficult to explain to colleagues who were used to working with children, with 'reading schemes' and an imposed vocabulary approach. It is also true that some adult learners expected to start where children learning to read began – learning the sounds and shapes of letters and then stringing them together, and reading aloud. That such methods evidently worked for some learners left many tutors – paid or voluntary – with a layer of confusion about what they were doing. It was Freire's 'domestication' (transferring knowledge) or 'liberation' (transforming action) argument which helped tutors to develop an approach based on what the students said (Freire, 1972, p.173). And writing down what students said created a new voice altogether, emancipating learners to name their own experiences, and to help shape their own lives. Such a methodology we termed 'a language experience approach' to distinguish it from approaches based on the use of an imposed vocabulary, like a reading scheme for children.

Freire's work also gave tutors permission to develop their creativity and to use Freire's concept of 'conscientization. In Australia for example, Roy Pugh recalls this time:

> That was the power that Freire had for me […] I've got permission to be with people and to talk with people and to bring them into […] some kind of collective understanding where we can all support each other and that's the way I've been. […] it was about helping people to become conscious of their worlds. The words they were using […] to be critical of the world […] to reflect on their world and to give voice to it and to have some aspirations about what they might do in it and with others (2020).

Common to the most exciting literacy work in Britain was the focus given to teaching literacy which placed writing at the centre of the process. Teaching reading through what students actually said liberated student voices, and these were sometimes shared through publication, where learners were engaged at each step of the writing, editing and production process. Publications like *Father's Cap* (Cambridge House Literacy Scheme Students, 1975), *A Bristol Childhood* (Harvey, 1976), *George and the Bus* (Fenner, 1975), *I wanted to write it down* (Women in Peckham, 1980), and *Brighton Writing* (Brighton Writing, 1976) emerged from literacy schemes at a time in the 1970s when the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishing was bringing together community publishing initiatives concerned to secure a voice for working class people's experiences (Howarth, 2016; Mace 1979). Together they built an impressive body of readings for adults – each stimulating readers to write, either in response, or in the recognition that writing could be 'for people like us', as one student put it:

> I think it is very important that a student sees something of their writing in print. I got a wonderful feeling when I saw it, a feeling that I could never explain. I feel as if people over there in other parts of Manchester or over there in other parts of the country need to see these things, need to see my work in print say "Oh, if he can do it, I can do it" (Glynn, 1984, p.6).

At the same time, a national newspaper for new readers, *Write First Time*, emerged, produced by literacy workers and students, and funded by the national agency created as part of the Government's response to the voluntary sector literacy campaign (Hamilton et al., 2000). At this time there was a massive increase in attention secured by the BBC's 'On the Move' programmes

in 1975-6, designed to both teach and to recruit learners. The editorial to *Write First Time 5*, line-broken for ease of reading, captured the spirit of the literacy work at the time:

> Few of us find writing easy. Have you ever said
>
> 'It's all there in my head
>
> but I just can't put it down?'
>
> So have we.
>
> So have people who write for a living […]

The authors go on to make the point that writing isn't only something you do when you can already read:

> There are all sorts of ways to get your words out.
>
> You don't have to put pen to paper.
>
> You can talk into a tape recorder
>
> or get someone else to write it down.
>
> It's still your words and your work.
>
> When it's written down it looks different.
>
> You may want to change it.
>
> Other people may say things
>
> that make you see it different.
>
> Then you can change it.
>
> You have more control than when you talk…
>
> When we write for the paper –

like when we wrote this article –

we have trouble too.

First one person tried four times,

Then a group of us argued for half a Saturday

about what it said.

Then two of us wrote it again.

We have to think exactly what we want to say

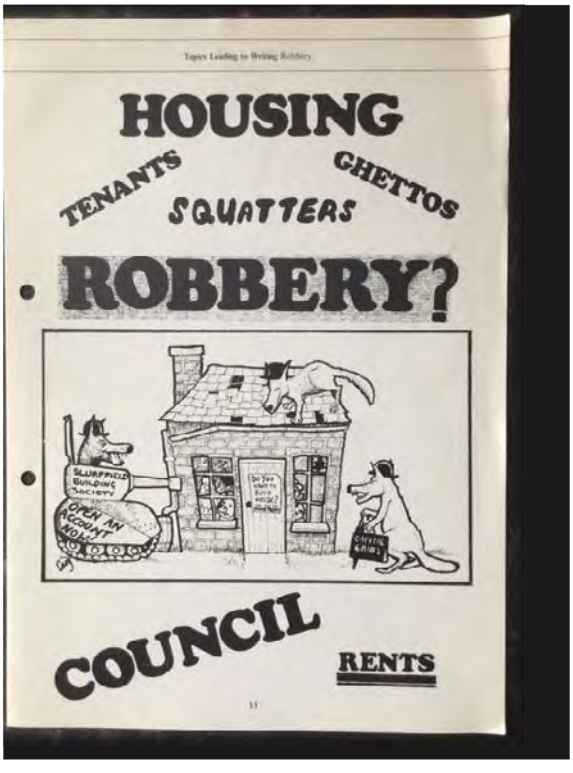
and how to say it clearly

and why, and who to
(*Write First Time* 5, 1975, cited in Tuckett, 1978, pp.136-7).

From Freire's work, tutors developed the confidence to assert that literacy is fundamentally political, that the task is to read the world, not just the words, and that 'washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral' (Freire, 1985, p.122).

By no means did all the literacy activity of the 1970s in Britain share these approaches, and like Freire's work in Brazil, literacy work that engaged students with the public debates of the day provoked a reaction. In 1977, in the first set of public enquiries into political bias in literacy work, Andrew Bowden, a Brighton Conservative MP, called on television for the Department of Education to institute enquiries. The Department had funded curriculum development at the Brighton Friends' Centre. In addition, the UK government's arms-length training arm, the Manpower Services Commission, was funding a full-time year-long Training Opportunities Scheme Preparatory course in literacy and numeracy, and the local authority (which gave grant aid to the Centre) also reacted to the pressure. The complaint was about the impact of the work of the Friends Centre in Brighton on the 'vulnerable minds' of literacy students. The *Daily Telegraph* article reporting the call was headlined 'Left-wing bias' attack on

school for semi-literates.' The Centre had published resources for tutors to use in order to stimulate dialogue and student writing, whilst developing technical skills along the way. They drew on newspaper reports on Mao's death, labour disputes in industry, debates about nuclear power, and the future of Brighton's West Pier. Each was designed to generate critical questions, not to sell answers. The worksheet that triggered the critique was drawn from the cover of the housing charity Shelter's front page, and used a series of strong words around the issue of squatting, and asked for students' views:



(Friends Centre, 1978)

The worksheet generated perhaps 30 student responses, broadly divided into pieces sympathetic to the rights of property owners, and pieces calling for the right to housing, and an end to homelessness. The Centre invited the MP to visit and to discuss his concerns with students (he refused), and published the local paper report of Bowden's views as a worksheet:

ONE TO ONE

Left-wing propaganda in the reading classes—MP hits out

Dossier for the Minister

What do YOU think?

The public interest sparked debate among the students. As Roger Weedon, one of the students, responded:

> What are we? What makes us different? Why can't we read about things everyone else can? We've got to read something: and I'm bloody sure I'm not reading Andy Pandy. That's a racing certainty' (Mace, 1979, p.24; Tuckett, 2000, p.81).

Of course, responding to enquiries sucked a good deal of time away from the work, but in the end the Centre was told by the Education Minister that the materials were, in the Department's view, not only unbiased but the best examples in the country of adult literacy worksheets, and the government agency Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) then published them as *Wages to Windscale: worksheets and how we have used them* (Friends Centre, 1978). Such questions about the alleged political content of adult literacy programmes recurred in other places in the late 1970s and early 1980s, always disrupting the work of local schemes, and culminated when a Conservative government closed down *Write First Time,* not long after it had published a learner's work hostile to government policies. The closure of *Write First Time* meant there was no longer a national voice for literacy student writing, and in a short time the focus on literacy through learners' writing lost significant momentum.

From the confidence and creative energy of the late 1970s, much of the 1980s and 1990s felt, for more radical literacy and numeracy workers, like defending

a redoubt in a losing battle. The return of a Labour government in 1997, and the report on adult literacy it commissioned from a group chaired by Sir Claus Moser kick-started fresh energy (Moser, 1999). Dramatically increased budgets, national training schemes for tutors, innovation grants for third sector providers, and the engagement of Departments across government all ensued, and the remit of a newly established Skills for Life unit in the Education Department was expanded to include English for Speakers of Other Languages. The price of such largesse lay in the elaboration of national standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening; and graded levels of literacy which could be assessed at three entry levels and two levels articulated with the national vocational qualifications framework. Over the decade to 2010 five million people gained a literacy qualification. The programme was assessed as a success. And yet. The price paid in creating the national framework was that literacy as emancipatory practice, as a tool of conscientisation, got lost. Literacy work, for too many, became concerned with the acquisition of technical skills. As Tom Macfarlane argued, 'You teach what you test' (Macfarlane, 1979). This is not to suggest that there have not been thousands of creative teachers engaged in emancipatory education, defending learner centred literacy work despite the limitations of a qualifications-driven national curriculum, and developing a pedagogy shaped by what Thierault calls 'conflictual co-operation' (Thierault, 2019). But the temper of the times, and the rise of neo-liberalism squeezed such work to the margins of mainstream literacy provision – to the residential colleges and voluntary agencies, to Access courses, and to a wider adult and community education.

A detailed research review of the waves of adult literacy development from the 1970s onwards concluded that 'The student writing and community publishing movement was a visible strand in early work in Adult Literacy. Today it is hardly talked about' (Hamilton et al., 2000b)

There is a reason for this. Hamilton et al. argued that changes began when the funding regime was formalised as a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and colleges took the dominant role in provision. 'Be careful what you wish for' was never so apt. Now called 'basic skills' the provision became mandatory with a new set of goals:

> no longer open-ended and community-focussed, but subjected to a funding regime that stressed vocational outcomes and required formal audit. In 1995-6 ALBSU reported that 319,402 people were receiving tuition in

> England, two thirds of whom were studying in the FE sector (Hamilton et al., 2000b)

Hamilton et al. saw the evolution of British policy and programmes from the 1970s on as a direct response to more powerful social concerns such as unemployment and the size of the adult population with no or low qualifications. The growth from a part-time and voluntary ethos ultimately led to very different concerns, following the professionalisation and marketisation of further and adult education. The number of volunteers involved dwindled dramatically. The resources were welcome, the programmes expanded massively and it changed the methodology to more of a utilitarian approach.

Outreach and Popular Planning

At the same time adult literacy work was developing in the UK in the 1970s, there were initiatives in London, Liverpool, Sheffield, Nottingham and Southampton focused on engaging under-represented and marginalised groups and, in particular, working class people in education for social change (Taubman and Cushman, 2000). They were reacting to a process of gentrification in adult education, described well as long ago as the 1950s by Wiltshire, but persisting into the 1970s:

> Each group settles down at its own social level, tends to be mainly middle class or mainly working class and tends to renew itself from that section of the community […] If the same process goes on in a Centre – and all the evidence goes to show that it does, then the whole work of the institution, perhaps the whole adult education programme in the town, will become socially homogeneous. In practice it will be captured by the […] middle class (Wiltshire, 1976 [1959], p.21)

Just as Freire and his colleagues spent time listening to community members before proposing ways of studying together, so too, in Britain, did progressive educators and the institutions and authorities for whom they worked recognise that the traditional modes of adult education were not working. They asked, 'who isn't there, and what can be done about it?' And to answer those questions they set about actively engaging with and listening to working class communities, and in co-designing programmes of work that were characteristically sharply different from traditional weekly day and evening classes. In Nottingham this took the form of housing and tenant rights education and campaigns on the St Anne's estate (Coates and Silburn, 1973). In South Yorkshire the Northern

College supported an outreach worker to engage mining communities and others to shape programmes of short-term residential courses (Ball and Hampton, 1984). In Liverpool, Tom Lovett spent time in pubs and community centres helping people identify things they wanted to see changed, and then what kind of things they would need to know more about to see it happen. It was a process of empowerment – and success in securing a zebra crossing outside a children's primary school spilled over. Learning leaks, as does the confidence that things can be changed, once you can see how power is organised and build alliances to contest it. Much of this work involved in engaging with the power structures of local government, defending people's rights, and re-building a sense of community where de-industrialisation had demoralised and separated people (Lovett, 1975). In London, a whole cohort of outreach workers were appointed, and much of the creative engagement with women's groups, with gay rights, and with black communities came from outreach workers' willingness to fund groups to explore and strengthen their organisational goals (Newman, 1979).

The Greater London Council (GLC) recognised the role adult education could play in London's economy through involving people in popular planning. It sponsored three projects in East and South London to provide support for less organised groups wanting to meet needs neglected by the market. The closure of the Battersea Power Station stimulated a good deal of interest from major companies, reported in the *Financial Times*, notable among which was the proposal to make the site into a theme park, an Alton Towers for London. For residents of the narrow streets of Battersea the idea was anathema – recognising that if the proposal succeeded the need for car parking and access routes would decimate community housing. The Popular Planning project called a community conference to articulate the frustrations and seek viable alternatives that would meet the needs of local communities. Alas, the GLC was closed by the government of Mrs. Thatcher before any of its ideas could be acted on and, as Alexander comments, 'without power, planning a better future and raising expectations is demoralising' (1986, p.11).

Practical outcomes did flow, though. Wandsworth's Black Pages brought together the small businesses and self-employed traders of south London's black and Asian businesses in a publication designed to advertise their wares, and to contest popular images, fuelled by the press, about black people's entrepreneurial skills. A childcare conference brought together childminders, care workers, health professionals and educators working with small children to explore their common goals. As a result of their discussions a group persuaded

a supermarket chain, developing a new shop at Clapham Junction in South London, to include a crèche, to enable single parents to shop there. Its success led to the inclusion of childcare facilities in a range of the chain's subsequent developments (Alexander, 1986; Tuckett, 1990).

A major element of outreach work – working alongside community groups to jointly shape learning programmes in support of social change – weakened as more narrowly utilitarian skills policies took hold in the 1990s. With the exception of New Labour's *Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities* programme, which led to a brief renaissance around the millennium, outreach to groups to foster learning on their own terms has declined ever since.

Voluntary Participation

Freire argued that in order to change the world, teachers needed to change their stance, to one of shared power with learners. And in teachers he included volunteers. One significant element of the 1975 adult literacy campaign in the UK described earlier was the substantial number of volunteers who came forward to help. They were trained and supported in a number of different pedagogies and without them the large number of referrals from the BBC action line would have resulted in many waiting lists. Curiously, the volunteers were rarely seen as learners or as co-workers – more as a means to an end (Lavender, 2007). There were different voices though, even then:

> For the volunteer to see her role as one of fellow learner makes her job both more honest and more easy. Conventionally, if the tutor thinks the student isn't trying hard enough […] she or he complains. On this model, if the student thinks the tutor is falling into stereotyped 'teaching' behaviour, then the student can complain (Mace, 1979, p.28).

The problem with volunteers can sometimes be how uneven the relationship is – differences in academic skills, social class distances, and uncomfortable truths. 'You can't criticise something that's free', as a student told Jane Mace (1979, p.44). In fact, earlier research on volunteers in adult literacy suggests that they were seen as 'as if' teachers, termed 'voluntary tutors' rather than co-learners, and there were many of them – 31,437 recorded as teaching in 1979 (Lavender, 2007, p.108; ALU, 1980). Freire's proposition that pedagogy should involve dialogue-based investigation of reality and co-creation of knowledge was not that evident in the involvement of volunteers in many literacy programmes of the 1970s in the UK. As time went on the numbers of volunteers engaged in

adult literacy work as tutors reduced rapidly. Since that time there have been successive UK policy interests in national citizenship projects – often connected to occupying unemployed young people (Lavender, 2007). However, volunteers have also been the cornerstone of many community programmes.

The UK is a set of nations who volunteer in extraordinary numbers. Over one in five people (22 per cent) volunteered regularly in the UK in 2017-18. At least once a month some 11.9 million people volunteer (NCVO, 2020) and these numbers have remained stable for several years. Volunteers, defined as those who give unpaid help to someone who is not a relative, get involved in a wide range of activities. They include volunteering for public sector organisations (17%) but most volunteer for civil society organisations (67%) and over half give time to more than one organisation. The data is significant: the scale inescapable.

Yet if Freire's thinking had only modest impact on the use of volunteers in the 1970s, the value of his approach can be seen to impressive effect still today. One programme which does value volunteers and their tutoring role in a way in which Freire would have recognised is 'Learning for the Fourth Age' (L4A). L4A is an educational charity, where students from local universities are matched carefully to work in paired learning with older people living in care homes in Leicester. L4A's evaluation took place five years after the programme started and is broadly described in Hafford-Letchfield and Lavender (2018 p.118). The evaluation noted Freire's observation that, 'Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity' (1974, p.31).

The study found that volunteer learning mentors brought flexibility, tailoring their work to the interests of the participants, and much co-production of learning (Carr, 2011). The 'new learning' in relation to volunteers was often informal but included learning Welsh, the novels of Thomas Hardy and discussing modern-day China. As in adult literacy, the volunteers usually worked one to one, but this time there was a conscious focus on reciprocity and mutual benefit. Also reviewed was the nature of 'giving' within volunteering, which had often been confused in the past as an unequal gift exchange (Titmuss, 1971; Arrow, 1972). In L4A the message was clear: 'It's very much a two-way thing', as one organiser said (Lavender, 2016).

It is a curiously British thing, this anxiety about the gift work (or 'gift exchange') involved in volunteering, with its ramifications of uneven social class concerns,

identified by Mace (1979). Nevertheless, with Lawrence Blum's careful definition of the nature of altruism as 'a direct concern for and responsiveness to the weal and woe of others' (Blum, 1980, p.4), there seems to be less unease about reciprocal gain from the process of giving. Altruism, argued Philip Abrams (1979), is a form of reciprocity.

The topic of motivation lies partly in the moral domain as Blum asserted, so it is not surprising that voluntary action can involve some unease from the organisers about discussing motives with volunteers. 'Acceptable' and 'unacceptable' motives become less of a problem if there is a genuine gift exchange and the nature of 'giving' is properly valued. In the case of ageing, it has been argued that we need to move beyond notions of dependency and towards the promotion of agency and autonomy (Biddee et al., 2013; Hafford-Letchfield, 2013). Sensitivity around volunteering is necessary where there might be job substitution but without voluntary action a great deal can be lost – benefits to communities and social cohesion. We need to see learning as part of that discussion about co-creation: volunteers as co-learners, called for by Mace in relation to literacy volunteers (Mace, 1979). In fact, Freire did not want to see this confused with non-directive education, where teachers and learners are considered equal:

> The educator who says that he or she is equal to his or her learners is either a demagogue, lies or is incompetent. Education is always directive, and this is already said in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed […] (Mace, 1979, pp.26-7).

More recently, Putnam suggests we might look at the gift of labour in terms of a norm of 'generalised reciprocity':

> I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favour (Putnam, 2000, p.134).

Understanding this norm of generalised reciprocity is important. We believe that many people frequently misunderstand the nature of volunteering, and see it more in transactional terms.

There is a parallel in the world of health. It has been suggested that, when medical volunteers work overseas, they need a framework,

> […] for understanding the limitations of their volunteering, whereby the presence of privileged volunteers implementing Western models of development may hinder aspects of local movements (Qaiser et al., 2016, e.31).

Qaiser et al. call this 'the voluntariat' and argue that this asymmetry, particularly among North American students working in short-term international settings, needs a pedagogy based on social justice. The 'voluntariat' need encouragement to reflect on the causes of health inequalities and to identify ways in which they themselves might be 'complicit in the suffering of the populations with which they are working, rather than seeing themselves as saviours' (Qaiser et al., 2016, e.36). It might well be the same in education too. Volunteers and learners alike may need the comfort of a framework which liberates through co-production and co-learning, and to shared understandings of how things could be better, and more equitably arranged, whatever the setting.

Conclusion

The adult literacy work in 1970s Britain has left a legacy, but not just in our understanding of what it meant for the students and the pedagogy which set out to liberate many of us from the grim negative attitudes prevalent then, but in the reflection on volunteers and their learning too. It was work initiated in the voluntary sector, migrating over time to state-funded provision, and confirmed a key finding of the finest report on adult education published in Britain – the final report of the Ministry for Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee, (the 1919 report), which had argued:

> In a modern community voluntary organisation must always occupy a prominent place. The free association of individuals is a normal process in civilised society, and one which arises from the inevitable inadequacy of State and municipal organisation. It is not primarily a result of defective public organisation; it grows out of the existence of human needs which the State and municipality cannot satisfy. Voluntary organisations, whatever their purpose, are fundamentally similar in their interest (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, pp.113-4)

Younger generations in a Britain struggling with the sharpened social and demographic divisions revealed and exacerbated by the 2016 European referendum have discovered their own sites of emancipatory learning through other struggles to secure the right to shape their future, for example in the climate change activism

of the extinction rebellion movement (Extinction-rebellion, 2020), revivifying in their own way Freire's belief that we should read the world as well as the word.

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