
Lost in translation

Despite the current social policy emphasis on 'listening to learners' real participation at conferences and other events is proving elusive, with colleagues often asked to represent 'the voice of the learner'. We can do better than this, writes JANE THOMPSON

Why, I wonder, is it so much easier to talk to a taxi driver, on the way to a conference about the state of the local economy in Gateshead, or about race relations in Oldham, than to have an equally frank exchange about the same concerns at the conference itself? It's a rhetorical question. You know some of the reasons as well as I do. The taxi driver and others like him are unlikely to be included in the conference line-up. The event is mediated through keynote speeches, power point presentations, professional role-playing and the turgid language of policy agendas, initiatives, benchmarks and outputs. Serious human concerns – the ones you are most likely to feel emotional about at a gut level or speak strongly about from personal experience – rarely surface in the orchestrated and anodyne arena of professional conference-going.

The same can be said about most of the meetings we attend. The ready recourse to ritual and procedure – so familiar if you possess the right cultural capital, so silencing if you don't – means that the usual voices always get heard whilst the knowledge and experience of others gets lost in the translation. What makes for easy communication with fellow human beings in informal conversations in everyday settings is rarely so expressive or authentic once the context becomes organised and formal. Insiders and anoraks flourish in the company of their cronies. In the same habitat, obvious outsiders or amateurs struggle to make their presence felt in any significant way.

When the subject for discussion is poverty, regeneration, cohesion, lifelong learning, it matters that all those with valid standpoints derived from their lived experiences are rarely in the same room. The notion of parallel lives, illustrated by a recent YouGov survey for the Commission for Racial

Equality (conducted 21-25 June 2004 and published July 2004), which showed that 94 per cent of white people have few or no ethnic minority friends, is just one aspect of a much bigger social divide whereby the more affluent and the least affluent in society rarely have meaningful contact with each other on a day-to-day basis. We don't, for the most part, live in the same places, send our children to the same schools, work in the same jobs, or do social activities in each other's company. As public servants, some of

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us may earn our living by teaching or managing or treating the poor, but, in general, the more successful we are in career terms, the less direct contact we are required to have with those whose lives we are paid to shape and influence. A reality which doesn't stop us from thinking we know what will be good for them and putting the 'right systems' in place.

The old joke that the meeting about apathy had to be cancelled because only two people showed up says a lot about disengagement and about our professional response to what we think is at stake. If the

rhetoric about participation, consultation and listening to those people without much power in society is to mean anything more than the latest in a long line of New Labour wheezes to pretend that democratic practices are being resuscitated in modern Britain, we need to do things differently.

Two agendas

The current emphasis in social policy initiatives about listening to learners, consulting residents, putting local people in the driving seat of regeneration schemes and regional partnerships, is concerned with two agendas. The most obvious is an extension of the managerial preoccupation with quality systems and market forces that has attached quality standards rather like designer labels to organisations in the public sector, much as kite marks and royal endorsements distinguish between excellent and shoddy commodities on the supermarket shelf. Revamped inspection regimes already require extensive evidence of 'customer' satisfaction when it comes to educational provision. A blizzard of paperwork and performance indicators provide the evidence to determine the benchmarks that shape the quality framework. These are technical responses to an essentially rationalist view of organisation and management.

But the second agenda, implying discussion, negotiation, capacity building, partner-like arrangements between professionals and ordinary people in the interests of sustainable, bottom-up approaches to social change at the local level, is about something else. It relates to social inclusion, community cohesion, active citizenship, participatory democracy – the necessary ingredients for securing greater equality and social justice. In this respect, the methods developed to quantify consumer satisfaction in relation to service provision are largely irrelevant. What is needed is a serious commitment to work alongside – rather than at arms length from – local people; a better understanding of



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Jane Thompson at a Learners' National Day of Action event, 2004

what their lives are like, expressed in their own terms; considerable respect for what ordinary people have to offer and a willingness to share power when it comes to making decisions and acting on them.

It's an agenda that requires a huge investment of time, thought, energy and commitment. Although reverence for 'the golden age of outreach' ignores a number of uncomfortable historical truths, it is true that community development and outreach practices that were once commonplace are now largely extinct. The delivery of provision may now be more efficient but even in its own terms it is less successful. There are now fewer people engaged in adult learning activities than there were in 1996 before the present structural reforms were invented (Aldridge and Tuckett, *Business as usual...? The NIACE survey on participation in learning 2004*, NIACE, Leicester).

The current attempt to short circuit what is a lengthy and potentially radical outreach process, in order to get on with business as usual, means the hunt is on for individual learners, residents and citizens to take their place at the meetings and conferences

arranged to deliver New Labour social policies at local and regional level. They are proving to be elusive. Concerns about representation, responsibility and accountability are suddenly magnified in relation to ordinary people, whereas the competence and credentials of Josephine Bloggs, attending on behalf of the local learning partnership or FE college, is never questioned. I am not the only member of NIACE staff to be invited to expert groups and regional committees to represent 'the voice of the learner'. It's a solution that makes a very bad joke out of any serious commitment to expanding democratic practice, although it will no doubt tick the necessary box when such systems are called to account for themselves.

I have also been witness to countless events that are about 'listening to learners' in which learners are conspicuous by their absence. I have observed otherwise sensible colleagues lay claim to being 'learners' themselves as the justification for not needing 'ordinary' learners to be present. But I have yet to hear a single one of them introduce themselves to a gathering of their peers as anything other than their job title

together with a check list of their professional interests and achievements. The logic of the professional classes being the learners, as well as the consultants, the teachers, the providers and the policy makers, is a convenient way of ensuring we only ever need to talk with each other. But surely we can do better than this?

Egalitarian practice

The approach that some of us used to work with frontline workers from the National Health Service to draw up a campaigning agenda for learning in the Health and Social Care Sector went some way towards more democratic and egalitarian practice. We knew from informal conversations with union reps and worker-learners that it was difficult for low-paid support staff to hear about and realise learning and training opportunities in the workplace. The NHSU, responsible for promoting and providing learning in the sector, is committed to widening participation but has a huge challenge on its hands to make contact with frontline workers and to overcome institutional resistances to releasing low-paid staff.

So we arranged a series of informal meetings whereby a small group of worker-learners and union reps met with two NIACE and two NHSU staff members. A discussion of the issues led to ideas for an event to coincide with the Learners' National Day of Action during Adult Learners' Week. Funding was secured to bring 80 frontline workers from around the country, including Northern Ireland, to London to the offices of the TUC. We paid travel expenses, overnight accommodation where necessary and backfill costs for those who would otherwise be at work. One delegate said, 'It makes a change that support staff have got a conference of their own rather than professional staff'. Another said, 'Coming to this is excellent because you feel valued. Somebody wants to know what you think and you feel like changes are now going to happen based on what we've done here today and it's great'.

The day was given over to a range of small group discussions with workshops led by union reps and worker-learners. Members of the National Learners' Forum acted as note takers and the whole event was co-facilitated by myself and a nurse auxiliary. We worked so well together you would think we'd been doing it all our lives. There was a

lot of irreverence, laughter and obvious enthusiasm in the room, with breaks for food, photographs and the opportunity for individuals to record their own experiences and tell their stories to roving reporters.

By the end of the day and a lot of discussion we had identified the necessary ingredients for good work-based learning. The content was arrived at in a democratic way and was responsive to the major concerns of all those who were present. This Agenda for Learning is now available as a bold and inviting flyer that has been sent to hospital trusts around the country and to regional offices of the relevant unions and the NHSU. It is to be distributed to their fellow workers by those who produced it and at local and regional meetings called to advance its demands. The NHSU website has an e-version of the Agenda and is fielding an email discussion of its contents and implications. Some of those present on the day are intending to discuss their concerns with senior managers in the NHS and they are now trying to set up a meeting with ministers.

There was nothing very revolutionary about what we did, other than to share responsibility every step of the way with everyone involved. It took longer. It wasn't

perfect. But it generated action and has started a campaign which will gather momentum as its message is spread. There is nothing to stop anyone using similar approaches in a whole range of different settings – except the will to do things differently.

Translating the social justice agenda into practice requires the direct involvement of ordinary people but also the active participation of professionals, if it is to have any lasting significance. For some, participation and participatory methods are simply a means to an end. For others, participation as indicative of democratic values is a matter of principle. The United Nations Development Programme identifies eight different levels of participation along a scale from merely nominal, which involves little that is meaningful, to transformative, which leads to empowerment and to direct and effective participation. A look at the UN scale (below) provides a useful guide to how well you are doing when it comes to genuine collaboration with learners and local citizens as distinct from tokenism. It takes a principled view of partnership and self-management: two other important concepts that so often get lost in translation.



Manipulative: The lowest rung applies to situations of non-participation, where participation is contrived and used as an opportunity to indoctrinate.

Information: When learners are informed about their rights, responsibilities and options, the first step towards genuine participation takes place. The main drawback to this stage is that the emphasis is on one-way communication without much scope for feedback or negotiation.

Consultation: This level involves two-way communication and learners have the chance to make their views known. But there is no guarantee that their input will be used as they intended.

Consensus-building: Here learners and professionals interact in order to understand each other and to arrive at negotiated outcomes that are tolerable to the whole group. A common drawback is that vulnerable individuals or groups tend to remain silent or acquiesce.

Decision-making: When the consensus is acted upon through collective decision making this marks the beginning of shared

responsibilities for what then results. Negotiations at this stage are influenced by the different degrees of power and leverage exercised by individuals and groups.

Risk-taking: This level builds on the previous one but recognises that what results may not always work out as people intended. There is always a risk that the best intended decisions may yield the least desired results. Accountability is, therefore, fundamental at this level, especially when those with the greatest power or leverage are the ones who run the least risk.

Partnership: This relationship involves an exchange among equals, working towards a common goal. In this context 'equal' doesn't refer to size or structure but to respect. Since partnership builds on the preceding levels, it assumes mutual responsibility and risk sharing.

Self-management: This is the pinnacle of participatory methods whereby learners and professionals interact in learning processes that share responsibility and power in ways that optimise the well-being of all concerned.

Multiple copies of the Agenda for Learning can be obtained from Kate Malone at NIACE (kate.malone@niace.org.uk) or from the NHSU website at www.nhsu.nhs.uk/communities

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