CHAPTER 11

ADULT EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Many adult educators have roots in community development, both as an area of practice and as a research site for investigations into participation, citizen engagement, and adult education. As educators, they tend to see the intersection of community development with lifelong learning as pivotal to the regeneration and creation of “civil society,” conceived of not in the Gramscian sense but in the widespread contemporary sense of the third sector between the state and industry. Although definitions vary, we start here with one from the United Nations which seems to address many of the salient dimensions of community development:

the process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social, and cultural conditions of communities and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress. This complex process is made up of two essential elements: the participation by the people themselves in efforts to improve their level of living, with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative; and the provision of technical and other services in ways that encourage initiative, self-help and cooperation. (United Nations, 1963, n. p.)

Though somewhat dated now, this definition captures the intricate government-community relationship, as well as the participatory engagement necessary, to create healthy and sustainable communities. Although the role of government in community development can be debated, it is increasingly clear that the state has a stake and a responsibility for engaging citizens in a process of growth and development that increases their material and social well being. How it does this is sometimes open for questioning but its participation is essential. We come across this aspect of state involvement (state being more than simply government) in what is commonly referred to these days as “governance” in which, as we saw in the second chapter, the state is said to engage in a loose network involving NGOs and other “stakeholders” in a supposedly and arguably “heterarchical” set of relations (see Mayo, 2011 for a critique of this).

Implied in the definition from the United Nations is that in the process of creating communities and in being “enabled” and “improving” their conditions, there is a great deal of adult learning happening. There is a strong lifelong learning element. Indeed it is the lynchpin of community development, whether this development happens in a domestic or international context. This learning happens whether the community has been created through a shared neighborhood or through a shared
identity of language, ethnicity, religion or other (Mayo, 2005). Though the term community may be ambiguous in either sense, the learning of this community is essential for progress and achievement.

LANGUAGE AND DEVELOPMENT

Following signature publications such as the Community Development Journal, we use community development as our preferred term to describe the activity of people working together for collective change. We do so because we intend to keep our focus on the community, that is the people working together in a collective effort that involves both learning and struggle. Yet, we recognise that the term community development is contested and that many of our colleagues have opted for a different discourse, one which stresses the notion of citizens and their active engagement in global matters (Gaventa & Mayo, 2007). For instance, noted community development writer Marjorie Mayo uses the language of “global citizens” (Mayo, 2005, 2010) and others the term “active citizenry” (Gaynor, 2011) to describe some of this community development. While we acknowledge that these terms have strengths, we speculate that much has been lost in the de-politicisation (not to mention disappearance) of the term “community development.” Once we move from community (whether a community of identity or a community of place) to citizens we witness the stress on the individual as responsible and detached from others – within a process critically referred to as the “politics of responsibilisation” or the neo-liberal tendency to instill in persons the notion that they are responsible for what befalls them. In many ways this active citizenship discourse displaces the focus on the group and its relationship to the government, funders, and opponents, and places emphasis on personal growth and development, which is but a small part of community development as we envisage it. It is often a sense of individual responsibility that is shaped by hegemonic forces (see Ledwith, 1997, 2005, 2009). These forces constantly prey, through a variety of mechanisms, such as for instance dominant discourses surrounding lifelong learning and active citizenship, on the purportedly “autonomous” individual. Once again, they thus ensure a form of “governmentality” (Foucault, 1991). Recall that this recurring term, in this book, refers to the way a government seeks to produce citizen behaviour in accordance with its policies. It also refers to the encouragement and inculcation of mindsets and practices by which subjects are governed “at a distance.”

An example of the new discourse is found in an edited book by Cornwall and Coelho (2007), published by the left-leaning, Zed Books, London. A survey of the table of contents of this book shows chapters on development around the world; the titles reflect an interest in “citizen participation,” in “new democratic arenas,” “stakeholder community groups” and “participatory spaces.” While the topics and the points of interest converge with those of community developers, it would appear that a great deal has been lost in the process (see Gaynor, 2011). It is difficult not to think of big business when community participants are referred to as “stakeholders,” and to wonder what happened to communities which have been