

# ‘Swimming in the swamp’ – inquiry into accreditation, community development, and social change.

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## **Abstract**

*Drawing from extensive experience as community educators, this paper discusses accreditation and its relationship to community development as informed by a cooperative inquiry conducted by tutors. Beginning with our rationale for undertaking the inquiry, it details our approach to community development and the centrality of education within this. It offers a review of some literature pertinent to both concepts before presenting findings from the inquiry itself. It concludes by emphasising the positive features of the awarding of credits for set-learning periods but expresses concern about difficulties with contemporary models of practice including a degree of discordance between accreditation and education for social change.*

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between accreditation and a particular approach to community development. It is informed by participation in a co-operative inquiry (2011-2012), a project that began with conversations between us and Frank Naughton from Partners Training for Transformation (TfT). The idea of co-operative inquiry is based partly on the ideas of Heron (1996: 1) who defines it as ‘two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience, and reflecting together on it’. This notion of action, and reflection upon action, is familiar to those of us involved in community development and who see education as a central process within this. At its core is the idea of praxis, that we reflect on our responses to inequalities and recalibrate actions in light of these. This process will throw up questions which trouble us - where we feel stuck rather than certain, and need to inquire deeper. A good question is one that matters, and to which we genuinely do not have the answer. We do not approach inquiry with a view we wish to defend at all costs. This is not to deny that we hold positions, but rather to acknowledge our positions in themselves do not enable us to move beyond our “stuckness”.

So what is the question here? We named our inquiry, Accreditation, debit or credit for social change? Understanding accreditation as the allocation of recognisable, measurable credits for learning, we wondered how this relates to what we see as the primary purpose of community development; the emancipation of groups of people who live with inequalities? Our question had grown out of experiences. We knew how following a pre-set curriculum contradicts the process-centred learning we believe in (hooks, 1994: 70) where questions emerge from participants and we follow them rather than shelve them to serve the curriculum. This way we uncover rather than cover content. We were familiar with how introducing written assignments affects participants, causing some to abandon dialogic learning to concentrate on the technical requirements of producing a standard piece of work. On the other hand we have seen confidence grow in people who overcome fears and produce that assignment, facing demons often engendered in unhappy school experiences. Some have described this process as life changing. We see how developing an argument to be tested by scrutiny sharpens participants' thinking and how pennies drop when feedback is given.

Aside from the impact on individuals, what about the impact on the project of social change; on addressing the structures that perpetuate inequalities? From a previous inquiry, some of us had devised a framework for capturing ideas called the "Four Ps" (CAN & Partners TfT, 2005). Each "P" refers to a level of interest in the subject.

- Practical. Our interest is technical. Can we structure accreditation to be more participant-friendly? Can we build assignments more easily into a process-centred learning programme?
- Psycho-social. This relates to the effect of accreditation on the emotions and relationships of a person. We are interested in the psychological experience of being accredited: feelings about status, being judged, acknowledged and so on.
- Political. This relates to the dimension of power, from the relationship between student and teacher, to the politics of accrediting bodies and universities. Who is entitled to accredit another person's work and why? At the heart of this is the notion of accreditation as currency and how credits by one body may have more societal currency than another.
- Philosophical. This relates to the meaning of accreditation and its fundamen-

tal purpose. Why accredit? What is its meaning within social change movements?

In our inquiry all levels are relevant. Indeed, in light of the 4 Ps, our question can be broken into four overlapping queries.

1. What is the meaning of accreditation in social change work?
2. What is the psychological impact of accreditation on groups who live with inequality?
3. Who has power in accreditation and how is it used in challenging inequalities?
4. If we chose to, how can we practice accreditation in a way more congruent with social change work?

*Understanding and contextualising Community Development for social change*

For the inquiry we accepted a certain understanding of community development and the educational processes within. There are a number of assumptions in our model. Firstly, that there is significant inequality in society and that this is systemic rather than the result of individual inadequacies. Secondly, that sustainable change requires a movement driven by those who experience inequality, supported by allies in solidarity. Thirdly, that while we can see patterns in social change processes, each example is unique and activists must develop their own pathways. This requires the aforementioned process of praxis, which underpins Freirean approaches to community work creating a synthesis with community education (Ledwith, 2005).

We see that the experience of living with inequality has an emotional affect. People can feel angry, despairing, hopeless, humiliated or shamed. Emotion however, is linked to motivation (Hope & Timmel, 1995a: 8) so this can be the genesis of change. When people collectively share experiences they move beyond self-blame realising they are not alone. If facilitated to do so, a group can critically examine the cultural, political and economic realities that shape their lives. This creates a foundation for organised collective action on systems that generate inequality. The resultant engagement is both confrontational and dialogical. Through confrontation, protagonists use protest to force engagement by power-holders. This may yield some concessions, but if the system is to be re-shaped, dialogue is necessary. Both protagonists and power holders come

to realise that maintaining the system as it is, is intolerable given the conflict generated. They also realise neither side alone can create a new system but that it must be co-created by those who run the system working with those who have been its victims (Hope & Timmel, 1995, CAN, 2012).

There can be a range of responses by power holders to this community development process. Beyond indifference, which the level of collective action may make impossible, we identify three. The first is to co-opt the movement. Power holders admit there is a problem and offer resources and a level of authority to help ameliorate the inequality closest to their particular situation. Community based projects are established to address housing conditions, drugs, unemployment, youth development and so on. Over time, the community activists become so engrossed in managing the delivery of local services, engaging in systems-change becomes less of a priority. The groups become part of the system rather than critical opponents of it. A second response is to react systemically. Decision making, resource allocation and attitudes are overhauled and a new way of doing business is instituted. However, radical change may be limited to one part of the system or localised to one particular community. It becomes a shining example of how things should be; a well-studied pilot project that remains an isolated exception but change does not penetrate the main system. Thirdly, there can be a genuine creation of something new, where equality is bedded down in the practice of the system. In any one particular case, there can be elements of all three responses and any such struggle will typically become a combination of co-option, isolated success, and elements of change affecting the main system. Whatever the example, learning runs through it. People learn to voice their experience, collectively analyse it, build local leadership, organise, plan, strategise and review, understand the systems with which they engage, and to dialogue.

Developing relevant learning programmes accessible to community activists (a group among which are a high number of early school leavers) was, from early in the life of the modern movement, an objective of community activists. Much of this was developed intentionally outside of existing educational structures, enabling participatory and experiential methodologies. These differed from more dominant banking approaches (described by hooks (1994: 5) as 'based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later date'). These programmes, sometimes supported by allies within universities, challenged the elitist and alienating nature of much formal education. From

the outset, pedagogues and learners advocated for formal recognition to compensate for the absence of school certification, and to honour achievements and status of locally devised and managed programmes (Kelleher & Whelan, 1992, Kelly, 1994, Quilty, 2003). Others worked to encourage pathways to university for activists building their capacity to pursue social justice. Accredited opportunities began to co-exist alongside non-accredited programmes where learning remained informal, on-going, in the moment and on-the-job.

However, there has been increasing structural constraints on community development as the movement has become depoliticised over the last two decades (Lloyd, 2010, Byrne, 2012). The clustering of community activism under State-funded projects such as The Community Development Programme, Local Drugs Task Force and Family Resource Structures brought welcome funding to areas previously ignored by successive governments, but also led to an influx of community workers motivated by a range of sometimes competing ideologies. Research by Powell & Geoghegan (2004: 156) reveals less than quarter of those surveyed articulating radicalism congruent with the model proposed here. The primary purpose of community development has also been reframed by the State as it steers practice towards service delivery. This most notably began when O’Cuiv, (during his office as Minister for Rural & Community Affairs) described community development as ‘a seamless delivery of state services’ in a circular to all funded Community Development Projects (CDPs). There has also been a State eulogising of less politically charged concepts of volunteerism and active citizenship (Lloyd, 2010) thus undermining radical intentions to reverse inequality.

Local Area Partnership Companies, originally established to administer ring-fenced development aid for business start-ups and re-entry to the workforce (Teague & Murphy, 2004) have been moved centre stage in the organisation, administration and funding of community development. All CDPs are now absorbed into Partnerships as part of the *Local Development Social Inclusion Programme* (LDSIP). This allows for little independence with LDSIP projects directed to dedicate 80% of their time to training and employment, 10% to accessing services, and only 10% to influencing government policy. The Report of the Local Government/Local Development Alignment Steering Group (2012) copper-fastens funded community development as a mechanism for service-delivery and the harvesting of entrepreneurialism; functions that are to be integrated into Local Government Structures (DEC&LG, 2012: 7).

### *Untangling accreditation*

There have also been profound changes in accreditation, a word now used to describe systems of quality assessment that approve an institution, a programme, or both (Harvey, 2004, Saarinen & Ala-Va`ha` la`, 2007). What is quality-assessed includes 1) the environment and learner supports, 2) resources including appropriate teaching staff, 3) curriculum design and content, 4) fair and consistent assessment, 5) programme accessibility and progression, 6) management and 7) governance. Although initially peer review mechanisms to monitor standards, (Harvey, 2004, Brittingham, 2009), more recent practice has been linked to the global commercialisation of education (Scheele, 2004). This former function characterised Ireland's history initiated by OECD dissatisfaction with standards in the 1960s (OECD, 2006) and leading to the establishment of the Higher Education Authority (1971). The less coordinated, Further Education (FE) sector developed, in the main, through Vocational Education Committees (VECs). Accreditation, when present, was ad-hoc, and by an assortment of bodies often alongside attendance certification from the Department of Education (DOE).

Whilst community education programmes connected to community development were historically designed with universities, an important juncture was the creation of the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) in 1991. Included in its brief was the development of programmes 'within adult education and community education... offered in various formal and non-formal adult education settings and which might not have previously attracted certification' (in Kelly, 1994: xxiii). In partnership with community organisations, the NCVA began offering accreditation opportunities in the late 1990s joining others such as the private British City & Guilds, aforementioned extra-mural university accreditation, and the DOE through Intermediate and Leaving certification (ibid: xxi-xxiv). This non-HE landscape changed dramatically with the establishment of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) in 1999. Existing awarding FE bodies were brought together under this structure, a merger that will be complete in 2014 when all original accreditor-conceived awards are migrated into a *Common Awards System*. Also important are changes at a European level. Ireland's participation in the Bologna and lesser known Copenhagen processes contributed to the development of a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) into which our 10 tier National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) fits. While many governments signing the Bologna Declaration (1999) chose direct intervention models, Ireland delegated responsibility to existing providers, reflecting our wider culture of consensus and

partnership (Killeavy, 2005). This opened up exciting possibilities for community education through increased, more affordable pathways and community groups themselves became Quality Assured, delivering existing programmes and devising modules many of which were approved within FETAC mechanisms.

These changes, although broadly welcomed, were not uncritically accepted. Before the emergence of FETAC, research by Kelly (1994) advocated for accreditation but voiced concern about the possible individualisation and therefore liberalisation of practice that conceives education as a way out of a community, rather than a challenge to structural inequality. She also cautioned about lack of clarity within EU policy on the relationship between accreditation and non-vocational community courses and suggested the only way accreditation can support community development processes is through a partnership of practitioners, accreditors and the State. A decade later, Keyes (2004) discusses conflict between student-led and subject-led methods suggesting that the accreditation adopted, favour the latter encouraging a passive, consumer-led approach that creates tension with ideological tendencies of many tutors involved. Keyes also comments on the way in which formulaic curricula can affect power dynamics in a classroom, a sentiment shared by Shor & Freire (1997). They challenge this at two levels, power over tutors by external, often non-teaching personnel with responsibility for implementing set curricula, and power within the classroom where it becomes difficult to employ dialogic, problem-posing approaches.

### **The role of Learning Outcomes**

What has emerged is a system controlled by a prescribed set of learning outcomes (LOs), defined by the ECTS as ‘verifiable statements of what learners who have obtained a particular qualification, or completed a programme or its components, are expected to know, understand and be able to do’ (European Communities, 2009: 13). These are conceived of before a group comes together and are measured within the NFQ across sub-differentials of Knowledge, Skills and Competencies (KSCs) (NFQ, 2003: 16-17). Whilst LOs are to be supported for their student-centredness over teacher-centredness they are open to question, not least because there is no agreed definition of learning. For Entwistle (2005) their standard application across wide ranging disciplines is illogical; can we really use similar benchmarks when measuring such different concepts as activism and arithmetic? Hussey & Smith (2008) are also skeptical presenting LOs as a management device for developing performance indicators, a marketing tool in the commodification of education and, in practice, little more

than an administrative chore for course designers.

Perhaps most hazardous is how, in community education, assessment of LOs is sometimes linked to an adoption of Bloom's taxonomy, a proposition that there is a logical progression in skills and knowledge as learners advance. First proposed in 1954, Bloom et al (1984) categorise learning as cognitive, affective and psychomotor, proposing a 6-tiered hierarchy ranging from *knowledge* (the ability to recall), at its lowest level, to synthesis and evaluation at its peak (where new knowledge is constructed and judgments are made on the validity of certain claims). When applied to a ladder framework of qualifications such as the NFQ, this taxonomy encourages behaviourist practices at the lower rungs, measured through repetition and reinforcement of set-knowledge. Although effective in encouraging recall, behaviourism can be criticised for its lack of creativity and critical thinking and its failure to acknowledge constructivist beliefs – where knowledge is created through the lens of our experiences. Behaviourism also encourages assessment of, rather than assessment for learning. More broadly, the adoption of progression pathways fuel perceptions that it is only those at the upper echelons that are capable of high level thinking.

### **The Inquiry**

We approached our qualitative inquiry as critical theorists revealing our social and economic assumptions about reality. This research paradigm allows us to draw from a range of theoretical influences and to collapse sometimes dichotomized objective-subjective boundaries (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Our epistemological stance is to centralise personal accounts believing each of us scaffold our reality dependent on our experiences. However, these accounts are shaped by political, social, cultural, ethnic and gender values that have been established over time (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Rather than believing these remaining relative, we offer a subjective-objective collapse that assumes that whilst personalised accounts reveal subjective truths, the sharing and validating of this knowledge generates evidence of an objective reality.

After some informal conversations, we decided to invite others to consider the following.

What impact are current accreditation processes having on education/ learning for social change and on the work of social change? [and], if we are uneasy with current accreditation processes but believe that social change work needs people who are “qualified” or credible, then can we begin to

think what another way of “accrediting” would look like?

We circulated this to around twenty purposefully selected participants. The majority showed interest and some who were unable to commit to the full inquiry made contact to share their thinking. The final group numbered eleven across six community sector organisations, enabling ease of conversation as we sought to break the subject open collectively. All of us had experience working on accredited (FETAC and university sector) and non-accredited programmes.

We met on three occasions with original inquirers acting as facilitators. Between sessions, literature was circulated and individuals took on independent pieces of work. This included desk research and an evaluative survey questionnaire with a group of ten, eight of which were returned. Another kept a journal on the active use of accreditation and its influence on their practice, some explored alternative models, and a video-recorded discussion with graduates from a FETAC accredited Certificate in Community Development was facilitated.

### **Inquiry findings**

As much as possible, we framed our discussions within the 4 Ps of practical, psycho-social, political and philosophical. The breadth of our research question became clear early on and, although some investigations were made into international examples of alternatives, pursuing this in any depth became too big a task for this inquiry. We also discussed domestic alternative possibilities prompted by a review of an international case-study where State endorsed accreditation was dropped in favour of self-validation. Also influential was a presentation by one inquirer on how we might more recognisably align some of our own non-accredited critical education with levels 8 & 9 of the NFQ without the involvement of a HEI. However, it is a limitation of this research that this line of inquiry was not pursued in greater depth and has not been considered as part of the overall analysis offered in this paper. We did achieve some analysis of psycho-social, political and philosophical dimensions, summarising findings into the following themes.

### ***An Emotive Issue***

There was the depth of emotion surrounding the issue and its intersection with socio-economic conditions. Some of us carried a sense of discrimination because we attended particular schools and some brought feelings of failure for not performing well at school. Some carried residue from being in the minority not to progress from school to 3<sup>rd</sup> level, while others remembered the impact

of being in the minority to progress. Common to all was a strong desire to learn, reflect and explore as adults, though those with experience of structural inequality felt this was not always reciprocated by the university sector.

### ***Pros and Cons***

Nonetheless, we all felt accreditation has some role, differing somewhat on the extent of this. We believe it builds personal confidence, gives credibility to community research, develops critical capacities, documents practice, and enhances the status of community development work. Regarding the effectiveness of current accreditation systems, most felt things are unsatisfactory. One participant described how decisions are driven, not by groups, but by funders and asked ‘as tutors are we colluding and what does it do to us and the group?’ Others felt the overly prescriptive nature of LOs within FETAC descriptors negated the importance of unanticipated LOs, delayed LOs and, perhaps most important to our work, the ability for groups themselves to determine what they wish to achieve. Also voiced was a potential ‘tyranny of writing’ with set academic methods encroaching on more spontaneous, unstructured narratives. There was concern about the future of short, non-accredited courses and about a hierarchy of esteem awarded accredited over non-accredited learning regardless of which NFQ level it could be benchmarked against.

### ***Credibility and credentials***

To discuss the complexities of validation and credibility we asked ourselves what makes us credible in our roles. We adopted the Partners TtT model Three Sources of Authority: - *authority from above* - conferred by a role we occupy or designation from a higher authority, - *authority from below or around*- conferred from those we work with in the respect or recognition they have for us, and *authority from within* - that which we give ourselves through self-confidence in the validity of our position. Sources of credibility uncovered include having lived with oppression, having experience working in this area, having acted as ally, having made mistakes, and having qualifications. Also shared were incidences where credibility conferred from those we work with (around and below) and that which we held within, was undermined by accreditors and others in positions of authority.

### ***Matching accreditation with community development***

Another important discussion emerged when we mapped the Irish accreditation system alongside the work of community development. As with Bloom’s model of learning, we found our accreditation system also assumes progression

from basic technical knowledge, measured in ability to repeat what is taught, to formulating and engaging with open inquiry, measured in capacity to synthesise, evaluate and argue. This revealed a system of highly scrutinised technical learning at lower levels, accredited by FETAC at levels 1-5/6, and more student-directed learning at degree and master's levels awarded credits from HEIs at levels 6/7-10. West (2006) helped us see an important difference between FE and HE with the latter positioned as generator of new knowledge, a privilege protected by academic freedom. Diversely, FE accentuates the reproduction of knowledge produced and validated by those within HEs, people whose socio-economic and cultural contexts usually differ greatly from FE attendees.

### ***Confronting contradictions***

There were also some paradoxes within our inquiry. Some of us had benefited both financially and intellectually from accredited periods of learning. When we conferred with groups, we noted their desire to enjoy these benefits too with many naming a desire to compensate for school experiences. If we chose not to accredit out of concerns about reinforcement of inequalities, are we disadvantaging those we work with whilst we carry the currency of educational credits? When contemplating alternatives such as locally based culture circles carrying the analytical and critical weightings usually reserved for accredited masters programmes, the dilemma was the loss of structured systems of critical feedback protected through internal and external examination processes. We also shared positive stories of accreditation reassured by personal benefits expressed by recipients and of its successful adaption to praxis oriented approaches. These problems we posed infused the inquiry and continue to exercise our thoughts. As one journal entry remarks,

There are serious limitations to the accreditation we use – but it has great strengths also. We see it as a resource which is there for the community sector to utilise rather than an alienating system. We know that it can reinforce inequalities and discrimination but we are excited by the possibilities which it has to enable and empower individuals and communities.

### **Conclusions**

Accreditation carries strong emotional resonances from our experiences of being accredited and consequent ambiguities about accrediting others. Given the centrality of learning and range of competencies required for community development, we believe accreditation can support this work in three specific ways. Firstly, it can generate significant affirmation. Many activists have not

progressed in formal education and the inquiry uncovered our own experiences in terms of status and dignity. Being accredited, especially on a subject relevant to personal life struggle, can lay a great foundation in personal confidence. Secondly, accreditation enhances the rigor of learning. Through writing analysis and reflections and submitting them for scrutiny, we test our assumptions and sharpen thinking. Thirdly, accreditation provides a guide to standards of competency. Given the demanding nature of the work, we cannot rely on voluntary effort, and must pay people to work in the field. Accreditation can assist in choosing who to employ.

However there are tensions. The first of these relates to method and the way in which accreditation demands a certain level of standardisation. In general, candidates must compete for credits on an equal basis broadly following the same curriculum organised into set hours. This does not sit easily with process-centered learning which follows the energy and interests of learners as they arise, rather than a set curriculum. Standardisation also casts the person allocating credits as the expert assuming the teacher knows best and can judge the extent to which learning is happening. In our work it is the participants who are deemed experts as they know their experience of inequality best. The role of tutor is to provide the processes and frameworks through which this can be examined, including introducing theories, research and case-studies from other sources as led by the generative themes of a group (Freire, 1972).

Another tension arises because accreditation is a currency strong or weak depending on how valued it is in the marketplace; the higher the profile of accreditor, the greater the value. This enhances opportunities for holders to personally advance in society and translates into greater currency for HE graduates than FE. It also gives accrediting institutions a powerful role in determining what is to be learnt even if they are far removed from the context in which the learning is taking place.

Furthermore the demands of professionalisation; that accredited certification in community development is a pre-requisite to employment may, as acknowledged, indicate a standard in terms of the competence of the candidate, but it may say nothing in terms of their commitment to the values inherent in community development. It also over-emphasises *authority from above*; the powerful accrediting body, potentially ignoring credibility gained from appreciation by peers and the inner credibility derived from personal experiences, confidence and commitment. It could be argued these are more relevant for com-

munity leaders.

There is also a discord in relation to beliefs assumed about the capacity of learners. Whilst community activists may have limited experience in formal education, our experience is that, given appropriate supports, they have significant capacity in synthesising meaning, collectively analysing and proposing alternative ways of organising society. The assimilation of much community education into FE slots learners and learning at the lower, technical levels of the NFQ and away from critical constructionist potentials it has more historically aligned itself with.

We wonder however if these tensions can be managed through creative application by those utilising accredited learning processes. Our concern is that this is increasingly difficult given the power of accrediting bodies to direct from afar, and government policy melding community development learning into training for employment instead of appreciating it as a civic, democratic social change process. For accrediting bodies there is a need to re-examine systems appreciating the need for open inquiry and analysis by those who live with inequalities instead of assuming a staged process of learning as the NFQ encourages. For community educators, ours is the challenge to push from below, to critique the role of accreditation in judging the competence, confidence and commitment of those wishing to take up leadership roles in the community development process. It is for us to propose alternative methods and methodologies and ensure the experiential, participatory, emancipatory features of our movement are not lost.

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