

Expert seminar on citizenship and belonging 2 July 2008

Summary of Key Points

This note summarises the key points and issues for further consideration by the Inquiry that were raised during the seminar.

1. Language and terminology The Inquiry needs to clear what it means when using terms such as citizenship, belonging, social cohesion, etc. These are all contested and politically charged concepts which can take on different meanings in particular contexts.
2. Power, exclusion and structural inequality Constructions of citizenship and notions of social cohesion can collude with and perpetuate structures of power and inequality. Definitions of citizenship and a cohesive society may be based on norms which, explicitly and / or implicitly, marginalise certain groups and individuals.

In specific political circumstances, lifelong learning may be harnessed as a way of reinforcing norms and encouraging conformity, e.g. citizenship learning as an approach to counter-terrorism. The question of who controls the learning is a central issue for this theme. More generally, it is important to recognise that exclusion from full citizenship is the experience of a large minority of the population who face multiple disadvantage, demonstrated for example in the widespread civic disengagement of the white working class.

3. UK identities Discussions of citizenship need to engage with the different ethnic, cultural and national interpretations of what UK citizenship means, including emerging debates about Englishness. This is where 'belonging' and identity are central.
4. The contribution of lifelong learning Lifelong learning has the potential to enable adults to adopt the critical perspectives on social, economic and political issues that are essential for justice-centred citizenship. Citizen roles might be divided into 'responsible,' 'participatory' and 'critical'. If this is not a hierarchy but a set of complimentary roles, how are they to be learnt? Behind this is a wider issue: citizenship is not something to be learned directly, but indirectly. So whilst we should pay some attention to curricula / content issues, it is more to do with action learning and pedagogy.

But, the Inquiry needs to be circumspect about the claims it makes for the potential contribution of lifelong learning to fostering citizenship, building social and community cohesion, reducing inequality and enhancing 'belonging.' The effects of education, including lifelong learning, continue to be mitigated by structural inequalities based on gender, race and class. How far it can be a force for a single, agreed notion of citizenship is a tough question.

5. Role of the state and the voluntary and community sector The VCS has traditionally played a key role in developing lifelong learning for active and critical

citizenship, and creating independent, subversive spaces for people to engage collectively and tackle structural inequalities linked to gender, race and class. Government policy that has sought to give a greater role to the VCS has privileged large VCOs and, almost paradoxically, squeezed out smaller organisations which are unable to win contracts. And, it is questionable how far government will genuinely support policy and practice, including in lifelong learning, that seeks to produce a 'noisy and fractious citizenry.'

In the current political climate, the role of the state in civic society may be one of the defining divisions between the main political parties, i.e. with Labour seeing the state as an enabling force and the Conservatives viewing it as something to be rolled back in favour of voluntary civic participation. What would be the role for lifelong learning in building civic capacity in a way that is inclusive and equitable?

6. Technology New technologies are enabling different kinds of learning to support citizenship, and alternative forms of citizenship to emerge, e.g. global social movements. This enhances the need for universal access to technologies and the competences to use them. Lifelong learning policy and practice need to understand how to make the most effective use of media and cultural technologies, and how online interactions translate into offline actions.
7. Citizenship and skills Skills training is not necessarily the antithesis of, or indeed antagonistic to, citizenship learning. It is important to identify which aspects are in conflict and which are complimentary. Debates around the development of critical citizenship need to engage with mainstream skills agendas, e.g. literacy, skills for work. People do not stop being citizens when they are at work, and what are the implications of this for lifelong learning?

Inquiry Secretariat
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Annex

Twelve principles for lifelong learning

The following core principles for lifelong learning are proposed in Bob Fryer's unpublished paper *Lifelong Learning, Citizenship and Belonging*, presented at the seminar. They are suggested as possible underpinnings for, 'a progressive, humanistic and deliberately optimistic approach to lifelong learning, aimed at enhancing the prospects for a participative and autonomous citizenship and facilitating a pluralistic, inclusive and mutually accepting diversity of identities and belonging.'

1. Focus on learners' own interests, needs and priorities.
2. Begin with people's own experiences and their own 'definition of the situation.'
3. Be genuinely life-long and life-wide.
4. Embrace all modes and forms of learning, including formal education, informal and non-formal learning, and incidental learning.
5. Develop learners' skills in independent and critical thinking.
6. Connect learning with action.
7. Link learning to the possibilities and prospects of increased autonomy for learners and citizens.
8. Base learning on the principles and practices of social justice.
9. Engage learners for citizenship and democracy through inclusive and democratic actions.
10. Enable discursive consideration of claims for recognition of difference.
11. Provide all adults with a lifelong annual 'entitlement' to post-school learning.
12. Provide public investment through a 'community chest' to build and sustain an infrastructure to underpin lifelong learning for citizenship.