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Paradoxes unbounded: Practising community making

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Abstract

The first section of this paper is a discussion of the paradoxes contained in definitions of the word 'community' and deliberately foregrounds and makes problematic conflicting meanings before arguing for a third definition and practice of community. This third definition and practice celebrates and even transcends contradictions within an active learning model of education in the community, aimed at tackling inequality and prejudice. The second section offers an autocritical narrative account of an education in the community project that illustrates how such a practice of community making can be achieved within an educational framework in which pupil is teacher and teacher is pupil and in which an imaginative, creative approach is deployed to construct a community making practice. The paper draws on understandings from community development, inclusive and creative education, emancipatory action research, postcolonial and post-structuralist theory.

Problematising 'community'

Despite a huge amount of theorising and a dizzying array of interpretations of what the word 'community' actually means, we do not seem any nearer to developing overarching and sustained *practices* of community. This is perhaps hardly surprising, given that there is, in fact, no common understanding of what the word means. I will argue that the widespread failure to acknowledge the inherently paradoxical nature of the word has led to some very muddled thinking in Europe and America, which would be grand but for the very serious consequences for actual people, especially those who have unfairly been the victims of structural and compound inequality. The first part of this paper will attempt to deconstruct the two meanings of community, and indeed the inherent internal contradictions of each concept, while the second part of the paper will try to offer a working model of community practice, focused on tackling inequality,

which recognises these contradictions but is able to creatively accommodate them, using both a critical and creative/imaginative approach.

The 'traditional' meaning of the word community would seem to be based upon an ideal of similitude – on shared values and ways of working. More modern definitions would, on the contrary, seem to be based on an ideal of tolerance for difference, 'otherness', diversity (Frug, 1996, p. 1049). This concept of the 'other' was first used by Hegel, but its most famous adumbration is probably in Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1979). Said's post-colonial argument was that 'othering' was part of the process by which imperial powers justified their domination. The act of domination was justified by viewing the subjugated people as 'other', and, as such, inferior. The colonised were 'constructed' as different – they are not like us – and weak, thus rationalising the need for them to be governed like children. 'Othering' also involves a projection of any aspects of the dominant culture which it wishes to repress onto the groups which are dominated. I will hope to show how this kind of cultural construction also operates within the realm of how 'community' can be defined. People who face inequality can be labelled as groups who consigned to the margin, considered as 'other' by the dominant culture which has been responsible for that very inequality. When the groups are othered, marginalised, they can, in turn be blamed for their own poverty. Postcolonialism has influenced thinking very deeply and that is why, perhaps, we now have the newer concept of community where 'other' is not seen as negative, where difference is not equated with inferiority or weakness. An ideal community is, therefore, one in which difference, otherness are respected and valorised, where groups are not consigned to the periphery, and where groups are equal.

In contemporary Europe and America and in many other places like Australia, the problem is that two definitions co-exist, but without a great deal of critical reflection about their inherently dialectical nature. That is to say, that there is an opposition between the concept of community as based upon similitude and the concept of community as based upon difference or 'otherness' as a positive value. Critical reflection, however, might result in the imposition of a new hegemony where one definition is abandoned in favour of another, or it might, it will be argued result in a post-structuralist acceptance and even celebration of contradiction and paradox. Peter Barry (2002, p. 61) explains the post-structuralist attitude as entering 'a universe of radical uncertainty'.

The contradictions are not just between two concepts or ideals of community, but within each concept. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that, if unacknowledged, both concepts will be subject to a kind of circular irony. It is a short step from an historical and contemporary ideal of community as locus for shared values – for similitude – to one of nationalism. And it is no accident that immigration has assumed so central an issue for European governments. and that there is a recoil from modern concepts of community as tolerant of 'other' and culturally diverse and revert to traditional concepts of community based on local, regional and national similitude – 'people like us'. The 'other', the different, is perceived increasingly as a threat – 'people not like us'.

The more modern definition of the ideal community is one in which difference, otherness and diversity and individualism are respected. This can lead to an insistence on the rights of every sort of otherness, of a tigerish individualism, or to a distorted and undemocratic privileging of the interests of small, democratically unrepresentative groups not infrequently intolerant of the rights of those against which they have othered themselves.

Traditional community may be a noble ideal. Nationalism may be a noble ideal. But the rejection of nationalism may also be noble, whether that be through ideals of

localism or internationalism. And the rejection of any such constructions in favour of a notion of community as a gathering of people with shared interests or with completely diverse interests – is that not noble also? And, it might be argued that people who do not want to be conscripted into any sort of community are to be admired, even though they too form a kind of community for they have been inspired by others who have chosen that path. And there are those who are named, defined and even branded as 'disadvantaged' communities and thus determined as other, symbolising deprivation, dys-functionality, anarchy and unmannerly disrespect for the hegemonic as a threat to The Community. And there are the millions who feel in the modern world utterly disassociated, alienated, unwelcome, uninformed; diasporic and community-less.

There has been much lamentation in high society about what is perceived as a 'loss' of community. In this kind of discourse, there is often a cloudy invocation of the lost community in terms recalling Tönnies' 'Gemeinschaft' (1887/2001). And, recently there has been much fine talk in the United Kingdom (UK), notably from the British Conservative party, about re-creating a Big Society – a notion implicitly based on a concept of community as traditional and value sharing (Cameron as quoted in BBC, 2010). This is not without its own paradox, given that this nostalgia for the lost community emerges from 'high society'. This is the 'Gesellschaft' or society that Tönnies argued was characterised by more abstract, centralised frameworks, and a much weaker moral obligation towards interdependency; doubtless because of the valorisation of the freedom of the individual to be different, 'other'.

Few in the UK can forget Thatcher's famous decree that there is no such thing as society (Thatcher, 1987). The 'Iron Lady' was enthusiastic about the potential of individuals to remake themselves, free of any traditional concept of community or indeed national or racial identity or gender. Nonetheless, the individualism she espoused and came to symbolise in the UK cannot but be viewed as antithetical to the traditional concepts of community now being adumbrated by the Conservatives (among others). For that individualism, that rejection of community, of society, has been hegemonic over the last thirty years in Europe and America. The contemporary version of the British South Sea Bubble[1] has burst, well and truly with the global recession. And it is clear that the vast majority of people in the West have been vexed and, in a very disturbing way, confronted by what McGrew (2010) calls the 'intermestic' nature of contemporary economies, a strategic management approach which focuses on the connection between domestic and foreign/international policies.

McGrew (2010) notes that the jury would appear still to be out on whether globalisation has increased or decreased inequality. Rampant individualism, reaching its acme in the brash imperialism of global corporatism and masquerading, in certain quarters of the world as the light of democracy, may not be completely welcome outside the West. Meanwhile, in the West comes a yearning for old fashioned community as the consequence of appropriating the notion of otherness and roughly translating it into individualism.

There is nothing new about this state of affairs, nor its vertiginous paradoxes. Nor is the yearning for some form of community new, though it nearly always assumes higher importance in times where the urban centre perceives the world to be in crisis; where the actuality of living in urban society is perceived as adverse in effect (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 2). The same desire for community was conspicuous in the centres of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and expressed in a variety of ways, most notably in the desire for the other of pastoralism and exoticism (Bongie, 1991). The vision of a golden, prelapsarian, sublime landscape and a contingent community that is

'traditional', based upon shared values and thus harmonic, is fatally undermined by its own elegiac tone.

In the contemporary world, a kind of alterity to the traditional pastoral ideal, is most popularly expressed in the urge for the making of virtual communities. Introna and Brigham (2008) have argued that this yearning for community is based more on a Derridean 'hospitality', an unconditional welcoming of the 'other by the other', than on shared values. Notwithstanding this emphasis, the internet, like all other forms of human interaction, can also be the medium for hostility and immediate gratification based upon the abnegation of the other. Still, we should not cynically deny the imaginative and compassionate potential identified by Introna and Brigham.

It may well be that this desire for community is a response to the 'anomie' of postmodern life. That anomie as a sense of alienation comes in part from the success of individualism and the allowance of otherness. Paradoxically, it may also emerge from a postwar rejection of nationalisms. Where nationalism is identified with past enforced compliance to standard values and racial 'purification'. The globalisation of the business sector as a kind of corporate version of aggressive commonality and standardisation, may also be viewed as a form of nationalism turned imperial.

Thus, in our own time, just as at the end of the nineteenth century, we may be said to be experiencing a crisis of representation, where paradoxes are vaguely sensed but have not been much articulated or addressed beyond certain academics and community activists. As Frug (1996, pp. 1052, 1056) argues, the common response across Europe and America has been to retreat from the crisis into 'purified' communities.

Education for 'community in practice'

This paper suggests that there is a third way, a third life and a community-in-practice as a metaphor that negotiates both ideals. That practice, derived from the combination of a critical, deconstructing approach and an imaginative and creative educational approach, can offer some optimism and hope and a practical basis for 'community making'. This latter term is chosen to foreground the critical importance of a creative, imaginative and lifelong learning process, while recognising the importance of legal and policy superstructures which may reflect and further effect that process at a macro level. Frug's call for fundamental changes in legislation to tackle a sly enclaving and ghettoisation of American city centres is persuasive (Frug, 1996). However, there remains the question of how you actually persuade people into some sort of learning process which alters the colour of their mind and renders the passing of the legislation possible. Since the two giants of community development movement, Freire and Gramsci, were both educators, I would want to declare a fidelity to the vital role of education in any process of community making. And, I would argue, there is still a great deal to be said for their dialogical, self-critical concept of education with groups who may or may not initially define themselves as communities. In that 'hospitable' encounter, as Margaret Ledwith has summarised it, 'the pupil is the teacher and the teacher is the pupil' (2005, p. 119).

Contingently, education is about developing imaginative, workable, ethical communities, which do not suppress differences or cause the proliferation of fragmented and weak communities, but strive to develop values of critical understanding and resilience. Ledwith (2005, p. 95) suggests that what Freire's meant by 'conscientisation' through education, is 'the process of becoming critically aware of the structural forces of power that shape our lives, and leads to action for change'. Freire's position might be said to be post-structuralist in that the poststructuralists would argue that critical

awareness derives from an acknowledgement that conflicting or contradictory interpretations are not just valid but necessary. This implies an educational process in which people suffering from inequality and oppression, come to learn of the social and political contradictions of the world, including their own contradictory truths about themselves, and as a result are able to construct, by their own active resistance, a new social reality (Cavalier, 2002). The role of the educator in such a process is facilitative and autocritical, for the educator needs to deconstruct her/his own certainties and hegemonies. To put this another way, pedagogy needs to be disruptive, deconstructive, radically uncertain. And, contingently, education itself must be democratic, where learners are equal to the educator, learning from each other, respectfully, dialogically.

Derrida, coming from a quite different tradition in critical philosophy, talks of 'hospitality'. My understanding is that a concept of hospitality denotes openness, a welcoming of what is 'other'. Hospitality to 'other' allows, at the simplest level, openness to the unprivileged, lived experience of the 'other', as a first step in addressing inequality. Allman (2001) makes explicit the importance of linkages between educators, community 'activists' and the people in sponsoring a dialogical relationship which has the power to affect social change.

Thus, this paper argues for a concept of community that is unafraid of un-making and remaking itself, imaginatively; that accepts the need for similitude, of shared values, not as a recidivist retreat to a pastoral idyll, but through a forward looking, sceptical and creative process which is capable of operating with contradictions, otherness and diversity, but with the common, community aim of tackling inequality, within itself, rather than being concerned with protecting itself.

Practising community making: a case study

The author has been engaged in a range of 'education in the community' projects and offers in this article one example to help to illustrate the potential for transcending or at least negotiating the unavoidability of a paradoxical construction of the concept of community. The community projects engaged in are small scale. That may be the very key to the participants and 'facilitators' pride in them. The participants and facilitators have wrought upon them with great intensity.

But we must, as educators, also ask ourselves if success in the making of community can ever influence the Centre? Community development, remains after nearly a hundred years, still a marginal item in any government's budget. Is this because community development, including community education, is seen as a threat to the status quo? Is the hegemony perfectly happy with increasing degrees of inequality? Or is there something fundamentally artificial about the idea that we have to develop community; something that should be innate? The problem is, of course, that the community is contended and problematic.

The account of one of the learning project acknowledges that any work, however co-negotiated, however empowering, must always contend with paradox, including those inherent in meanings of community and within that community as potential contradictions of self-understanding.

What follows draws on the creative potential of a pedagogy of deconstruction, of disruption, in the redefining and recreation of community. I mean by this that a pedagogy of deep questioning where participants interrogate the contradictions inherent in concepts of community, imposed from outside, and go on to interrogate how they, in turn, can mimic that imposition by marginalising people with mental distress. I will try

to demonstrate that this process of deep questioning is the foundation for a creative annunciation in which participants re-make their own community through an imaginative construction, in this case, the making of a film. I will narrate this in the first person, using an autoethnographic approach as I was directly involved and because this may help to create a closer sense of the living reality the practice a small community making initiative. Current autoethnography is poststructuralist and deconstructionist in its outlook, openly acknowledging uncertainties and contradictions. This kind of approach encompasses a meta-reading of the research process itself, rather than just focusing on a set of 'findings'. The researcher/teacher is self-critical, a learner with learners, continually reflective and willing to openly admit instabilities, 'messiness' and even crisis in the evolving relationships between researcher and participants. As models for this kind of approach, I draw on anthropologists such as Peter Metcalf (2002) and researchers in the field of education like Peter Clough (1999), Tina Cook (2009) and John Quicke (2010).

I will also deploy what has been termed 'thick description'. Joseph Ponterotto (2006) offers a very illuminating account of this term:

> 'Thick description' involves accurately describing and interpreting social actions within the appropriate context... [It] captures the thoughts, emotions, and web of social interaction among observed participants... The context for and specifics of, the social action are so well described that the reader experiences a sense of verisimilitude as they read the researcher's account (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 542).

Promoting positive attitudes to mental health among rural men

The Mentalentity Project came about as a result of a call for proposals by a statutory sub agency of the Southern Health and Social Services Trust; the Southern Investing for Health Partnership (SIHP), who were commissioning a project which would promote the positive mental health of men in rural areas. The Southern Trust operates in a largely rural area, most of which would be an hour drive at least, south and west, from Belfast, Northern Ireland. The project was undertaken by a consortium involving a local pan-disability group called Out and About (based in Armagh city), Queen's University School of Education and an independent arts project called the Nerve Centre (based in Derry and Belfast). These three organisations had co-operated on a wide range of creative education in the community projects stretching back over 10 years. We had found that a creative approach, engaging the imagination of participants worked very well with 'hard-to-reach' learners who had found the more orthodox, instrumental, passive learning model in which they were passive subjects absorbing an unquestioned and unquestioning and largely dis-imaginative learning, inimical. I was involved in all three organisations, as teacher within the Open Learning Programme and as a voluntary member of the boards of the other two.

In our own approach to the project, we were keen to challenge a campaign oriented approach which was essentially directive, imposed from the outside centre (if I may risk a paradox), 'top-down' and melodramatic. We understood that this approach had not really worked previously because it was too remote and did not engage the 'target group'. The hidden and masked forms of mental ill health among rural men and their unwillingness to discuss such issues has been well documented (Philo & Burns, 2004).

So, what were our most important research questions? They might be summarised as follows:

1. How do the men define and view their rural 'community'?
2. What role does education have in developing 'community'?
3. What do rural men in this 'community' think about people who had mental health problems?
4. Could we develop a dialogic educational process in which the men could construct a new, more humanised and empowering attitude in which they themselves were active agents of change in their own 'community'?
5. Could a creative rather than campaigning approach, based on the production of a piece of educational 'art work', in this case, a film, be more appealing to the men and their communities as an instrument for changing attitudes?

In drawing up a grand plan for the project, Out and About and myself as 'scribe', believed that we could build on years of previous work in and with the community through many 'micro-projects', and also propel the project beyond the very local. We began in an area which had a very long history of community and rural development work and which already had a number of sub-regional networks. Our idea was that we would draw together an overall steering group, which would include both regional and sub-regional organisations from the statutory, voluntary sector. This encompassed housing and health authorities, mental health charities, rural and community sub-regional networks, police and voluntary organizations like the Farmers' Union.

While the first meeting was relatively well attended, there were conspicuous absences and there did not seem to be much by way of 'volunteering'. At the second local network meeting there were four women and a very large plate of sandwiches and fruit. Three of the women were SIHP staff. The fourth was myself. So, we had to either abandon the project or 'revert' to working at micro level. We thought of this process in terms of the classic action research cycle of action and reflection (Carr & Kemmis, 2002; Hughes, 2008; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). We gathered ourselves and decided, with the help of an SIHP development worker (crucially, because she not only knew the local scene but had an animatory approach), to approach a very small men's group in Crossmaglen, Menaware. Their representative had, in fact, attended the first meeting and asked a lot of tough questions. But he agreed to 'talk to the boys'.

Menaware was a very unusual phenomenon in itself. While there are stacks of groups all over the UK that contain only men, men's community of interest groups are still very much a new feature in the community development landscape. While not entirely uncommon in metropolitan centres in the UK and elsewhere, they are as rare as hens' teeth even in Belfast and Derry, and in rural areas, here, they are almost nonexistent.

Again, I am hesitant about drawing any firm conclusions, but suggest that only this kind of a group was far enough ahead of the hegemony of existing community development itself, to even entertain a project such as ours. Menaware was a very loosely affiliated group with elastic membership, which had been funded by SIHP and others to do a number of projects, including the making of an eco garden in a housing estate in Crossmaglen and various exchange projects. The 'boys' were not metrosexuals. It was a very mixed group, a few of the men were educated to university standard and many left school with few or no qualifications. In that sense, many of them were 'non-traditional' learners.

Whatever else we got wrong, we hoped, at least, that the project would engage non-traditional learners, among others. We had proposed that we work with local groups to devise 'hands on' projects, which were creative in both concept and form and was goal-

centred, that is to say, that the community of learners would be enabled to draw upon themselves as creative and resourceful people rather than as marginalised inferior beings. We had many reasons for this, based on our experience of working with non-traditional learners and on wider research and community development projects focussed on men (Golding, 2008).

It is to the enduring credit of the men that they agreed to give the project a try. This was a university course, a very difficult topic and a form that none of them had any experience in. I would concur with Barry Golding (2010) that the project had to be 'sold to the men' by deconstructing the official language and burying it, 'unaming' it, so that the project was presented as a chance to do something practical, in this case, making a film.

In relation to issues of hegemony and disrupting otherness, I will make one or two observations, as participant-observer. At the beginning, I was welcomed because the unofficial leader or more properly, 'animus' of the Menaware group, brought me in and vouched for me. I was an outsider as an academic, as somebody from a rural town maybe forty miles away and as a woman. I was an insider as a person with a country dialect, somebody who put in a garden every year and as somebody who transgressed or subverted the teacher/pupil hierarchy that they expected. That I also disclosed myself as a carer, close to somebody with severe mental illness may also have helped to build my credibility. In that sense, I was a 'border-crosser' (Ledwith, 2005, p. 129; Maginess, 2010). I was 'operating' literally and metaphorically on various borders. And, of course, I was also very aware that a men's group, in a highly conservative and, in many respects enclaved rural area, was as liminal as I was.

Trust in such a context, is very fragile. When I asked the men about what it was like to live in Crossmaglen, even though I had been enthusiastic about being from a small rural area, and fairly candid about the little local difficulties I had experienced in it; the men, to a man, eulogised Crossmaglen. There were no problems the like of those I had suggested. The defensiveness was understandable. Crossmaglen is infamous, as 'bandit country'. South Armagh is also one of the most beautiful areas of the British Isles and has all sorts of official designations to that effect. The men spoke eloquently of this and also of the great 'community' that exists. In Freirian terms, the men denunciated negative representations of their community and annunciated a counter-version that was much more constructive. By 'denunciation', Freire refers to the naming and analysis of existing structures of oppression, by 'annunciation' he means the creation of new forms of relationships and being in the world as a result of mutual struggle against oppression (McLaren & Leonard, 1993, p. 15). To put this another way, the first layer of 'findings' in the project was the annunciation of a far more positive and attractive reality than the negative representations imposed upon them from outside, whereby Crossmaglen was 'other' – alien, dangerous. Their concept of community at this stage was of a beautiful place where people shared values; community as similitude. But, it could be contended that this was a false annunciation, because the men had replaced one externally imposed version with another, though a sense of solidarity against the centre. It seemed to me that they had adopted an overly ideal pastoral vision of their community, 'mimicking', to use Homi Bhabha's postcolonial vocabulary (Bhabha, 1994), a newer hegemony which had officially nominated South Armagh as a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This pastoral idyll is frequently associated with those writers on community who see community as a place of shared values, a place that is unchanging and rural and beautiful. The contemporary pastoralisation of places like South Armagh brings to mind a perhaps similar vision in the late nineteenth century when people from the urban centre like Yeats and Synge,

taking their cue from the Englishman Matthew Arnold (1867), glorified the wild, natural beauty of marginal rural places.

Freire describes the predicament of the oppressed as an 'oppression hosting conscience', where the worldview of the oppressor becomes 'housed within' the victim's own way of seeing the world (as cited in Cavalier, 2002, p. 257). This notion of 'cultural invasion' is akin to that characterised in the postcolonial thinking of Said and Bhabha – the colonized ends up mimicking the attitudes and values of the colonizer, without irony. In my view, that mimicry is a kind of collusion with the colonizer.

Commentators in the field of ethnographic studies have, in what is termed the 'autobiographical turn', confessed to the many situations they found themselves in where their communities froze them out by delivering a set of ideal echoes of what the researcher already believed, sentimentally, about the community he/she was studying (Metcalf, 2002; Clough, 1999; Maginess, 2007). I knew and they knew that I knew that their initial encomiums about Crossmaglen were collusive. The miracle is that they began to trust me sufficiently to breach that collusive defence, to offer me a glimpse into the 'little local difficulties' that I had earlier acknowledged in my own history. And, I must acknowledge that my own 'ideal echoes' – that mix of pride and criticism, were not, initially 'reflected' by the men of Crossmaglen. They were not ready at the start for the criticism of small rural places that I had marched in with, even if it was mixed with an obviously fierce attachment to and loyalty to my own place. I was, arguably, also guilty of a charge levelled against Frieire by Lewis; relying on an annunciation that was unduly controlled by the teacher (Lewis, 2011).

Like them, I did not want to be characterised only as 'oppressed', even though we all would have fought our own campaigns, stretching back three hundred years, against marginalisation, conquest, oppression, to say nothing of more recent campaigns about gender equality (which not all the men would necessarily have subscribed to). We all colluded, defensively, in rejecting externally imposed classifications of us as 'other' in terms of being marked as deprived and disadvantaged communities in need of intervention – as passive and hapless 'subjects'. While at the same time we were also passionate about challenging those who shaped policy and held power, understanding the systematic marginalisation and structural enclaving of our communities in terms of the distribution of resources like health care services and investment; resources that tend to be centered around Belfast or areas with an historically manipulated demographic likely to be loyal to the ruling majority. That is to say, the Unionist majority operated a number of policies, including 'gerrymandering' of housing to ensure that they would retain a political majority. Nationalists/Catholics from poorer backgrounds were rehoused in enclaved areas, where their vote was literally squeezed, thus artificially ensuring a greater Unionist majority. It is perhaps not entirely co-incidental that the marginal areas designated by the pastoralising centre as Areas of Outstanding Beauty are also those areas least productive agriculturally, and concomitantly the areas inhabited by the minority Catholic community in Northern Ireland. The history of how the better, more productive land tends to be occupied by English adventurers, colonial civilizers, yeomanry and English and Scots 'planters' is beyond the scope of this paper. But a process of colonization has led, as it has led elsewhere, to a nexus of contradiction and uncertainty. In the context of our discussion here this may be paradoxically a very fruitful inheritance.

Over the weeks, the men began to challenge their own narrative, their communal self-representation and mimicry of the hegemonic line. And thus they began to drill deeper into the research questions. The second layer of their 'findings' were, therefore, much more uncertain. The original concept of belonging to a pastoral community with

shared values was disrupted by their own deconstruction. This was not a re-imagining which led to an immediate and thoroughgoing denunciation of the dominating hegemony. The critique was far more hesitant and qualified. And we had many stumbles and cross-purposes along the way. In that sense it truly was a piece of messy research (Cook, 2009).

Deetz and Simpson (2004) identify three different kinds of dialogue; the liberal humanist, aimed at finding common ground or consensus so that a community can comfortably co-exist, the critical hermeneutic emerging out of the thinking of scholars such as Bakhtin, Derrida, Foucault and Levinas. This latter:

> ...emphasizes the role of indeterminacy and 'otherness' in reclaiming conflicts, resisting closure and opening new opportunities for people to be mutually involved in shaping new understandings of the world in which they live and work (Deetz & Simpson, 2004, p. 3).

It might be said, then, that a critical hermeneutic form characterised our processes of film production, through which meanings of community were indeterminately constructed and acted as an opening for the audience. Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) warns of the dangers of harmony based on the rational reductions of privileged middle-class academics. As we went on, the shift described by Ellsworth manifested itself in our group, and in a similar fashion. The men in the group had different views about mental illness and health and I had different views from them myself. I need no convincing that it is impossible to talk fully about the irrationality of a manic episode rationally, even at the first remove of a carer. The trust between the men and myself and the men themselves really started to grow in what Americans call 'down time'; over lunch or during the many filming sessions, nearly all of which I attended, when individual men would start to confide some of their own distress and others share the fear that they had of people they knew who had mental illness. All of our narratives, and indeed the narrative we created in the end with the film, were in Ellsworth's sense, partial and post-modern (1989).

I say, partial, because none of us could claim to reach fully into the lived experience of even one individual's mental distress, even after deconstructing constructions of a rural community and mental illness. This was an approach, postmodern in its refusal of easy or superficial rational agreement imposed by the outside, including academics.

The project took place over a number of months, so research 'findings' emerged very gradually. We began with a fairly structured series of workshops in which the men discussed issues of community, of identity and then attitudes to mental health. We had guest speakers – a service user, a male 'carer' and a health care professional. All of them were men and all were very 'down to earth'. The format was very informal – almost conversational. This learning was thus 'decentered' in a number of ways – it took place in a community setting, the traditional relationship between teacher and student was challenged and disrupted. So the men and the educators were exposed to a very different, 'subversive', kind of education, which encouraged us all to be more open and critical. The talking workshops were complemented by practical hands on, filmmaking workshops, so that there was a relief from the quite challenging business of interrogation. The relief, of course, was short-lived, since the release into a talk-free world brought its own fierce challenges. This was not always creativity 'lite' but another set of serious challenges for people who had not the faintest idea of how to make a film or how to express what they were discovering in their questioning in imaginative terms. How could they begin to shape the emerging new others of themselves, never mind a new 'other' of their 'community'? But they were beginning to

know that it was permissible, even ok, to speak unfettered by judgement or the need to say the thing somebody, some 'community', expected them to say. Sometimes 'revelations' occurred within the workshops – as the men began to move to their own findings. But I would say that most of the findings were 'collected' as we constructed, 'announced' the story we were going to make for the film. The men gradually inhabited that story imaginatively and so were able to translate what they were learning into a form that was also liberating for them because it was a shared story and also allowed them a necessary distance from an overly personal or individual set of findings. Of course, it was a made-up story with no objective claim to being rational or 'real' and in any case only told a small part of many stories. In the end, unlike the Freirian approach as described by Lewis, the men 'dis-identified' with representations of themselves by the outside by making their own image (Lewis, 2011, pp. 40, 42). In other words, they constructed an alterity of their own making; a dramatisation of an imagined community in which they were able to imagine themselves into inhabiting the experience of the previously repudiated 'others' of a person with mental distress and their family. We had moved a long way from our initial discussions about how the men thought about themselves as part of a rural 'community'. As a 'teacher' I did not cajole or coerce this, even though there were parts of the final image that I did not think rang true to my own experience as a carer and my observations of a variety of people undergoing a psychotic episode, and even though I thought that there was a lack of precision at times in how the men chose to represent the different support systems available.

But the film, in its own modest way, does announce and voice an understanding and compassion about the actual experience of mental illness (and the oppression it brings so unfairly upon the individual and their family), that was a long way from the early idealising and nostalgic collusive position where mental distress was edited out as 'other', by an othered community defensively protecting itself against the dominant and reproving centre. And indeed, it was a long way from the denunciatory and deconstructive position which followed and expressed itself in a number of ways, some positive and some less so. Thus, the denunciatory phases were positive in that the men were encouraged and enabled to deconstruct the collusive idealist stance and to 'deconstruct' their own community. The second layer of their 'findings' revealed that, while some aspects of it were brilliant, other aspects were very alienating, for example, the loneliness and exclusion experienced by people who were 'different', who did not necessarily find football all-consuming, or who did not completely or partially subscribe to certain ideological or even tribal hegemonies which operated in that community). That deconstruction of the internal realities of the community gradually deepened so that the men were, after a while, able to talk very honestly about some of their own fears and the 'othering' that some had enacted in relation to people with mental distress.

That concept of community as centering on similitude and shared values and a pastoral version of rural life, was 'disrupted' by the men through that alternative model of community emphasising difference, diversity, otherness and what I might term 'dis-belonging'. There were two aspects of this – the 'group' viewpoint began to fracture and dissolve as some individuals began to articulate their 'findings' about their own position in a community which did not value difference or diversity. Some of the men attested, for example, that they did not want to buy in to certain political viewpoints or the collective passion for football. Some, furthermore, spoke of the 'community' reaction to this as negative and intolerant.

When the discussions deepened further into attitudes about mental health, the 'findings' of the men were quite varying, from an admission of fear to a more compassionate position. After the speakers had brought more new information about the

lived experience of mental distress and the support systems available – including what could be available among people in the community if they chose to participate in support – another layer of findings was available to the men.

As one of the men commented afterwards:

> Even to get the men to talk about the stigma and shame many of them felt about having relations or neighbours who had mental problems took a lot of trust to be built. And then to go on from that to talk about the problems associated with not talking, about denial. Some of the men in the group were unemployed, some had drink or relationship problems. The project brought their own issues home to them. Mental distress was not, somehow, outside them, but in their own community and among us as a group.

Another participant said: 'I was able to express myself better and bond with the other men, much more than I had anticipated'. Another, who had experienced mental distress said: 'I have always someone I can talk to now'. Another man said: 'The project gave me a reason to get up in the morning'. And one participant talked about the way the project enabled the men to decide the way they would learn: 'It allowed you to participate at a level you felt comfortable with as the tasks were agreed and taken on appropriately. Each person brought their own skills and expertise to the table'. Perhaps the most moving comment was from the participant who said: 'It was like finding one rock and then others rolling down the hill until suddenly you found you had a rockery'.

It is clear from the way they wrote the story that they 'revealed to themselves' another layer of findings. For in making their own story, they were able to imaginatively inhabit the lived reality of mental distress. Most strikingly, the men and the educators were in possession of a 'finding' that they themselves had a big part to play in supporting people in their community who had distress. There was a new sense of responsibility, not just a change in attitudes.

In turn, and with the new knowledges they were gaining through the workshops about mental health and illness, as well as about being able to actually make a film, the men freed themselves to become creative, optimistic, and resourceful. Now, it may also well be true that they chose to make a narrative, fictional film, because they did not want to 'appear as themselves', somehow pontificating about mental illness and health. But this distancing impulse was, perhaps ironically or paradoxically, also a kind of 'othering' which was far more meaningful and powerful than either a documentary 'campaign' style film, or a straightforward autobiographical account. The project was, paradoxically, built on a distancing from direct, personal experience. In that sense, it was artificial, inauthentic. But at the same time, the expansion of the narrative to include the contradictory and fragmented voices of the whole group as well as those from beyond the group, enabled us to make a creative product free from narrowness which could resonate in that community and well beyond it, precisely because it dramatized the problematic as a commonly shared situation before moving the 'plot' to possible solutions which actually involved the community. Through collusion, denunciation and annunciation, a third perspective, a potential practice of community, built upon an 'imagined' community, was enacted.

In an early part of this paper I suggested it might be possible to move from the dialectical prison of two contending (and internally contradictory) concepts of community to a third. It seems to me that the men and the educators moved from one definition of community – where community is about shared values and 'people like us', through the other definition of community which emphasises difference and diversity and a respect for 'otherness', to a third position where they realigned and redefined themselves as a community who had created a new sense of shared values,

which was built upon a new knowledge and appreciation of otherness and diversity, and difference. They did not arrive at this position by theorising it but rather by 'imaginatively' engaging with very difficult and challenging issues. So the film became both their story and not their story. They were able to accommodate contradiction, radical uncertainty, to be hospitable to it as a community of learners, but also as a redefined geographical and cultural community. And, speaking of contradiction and paradox, to imagine, the self must be othered. To put it another way, it is not possible to produce creative work unless you can imagine yourself to be other than you are. The creative act involves an openness, a generosity based on a willingness to 'learn' about what is not the self, about what is familiar, to put yourself in the living experience of the 'other'. In other words, imagination is a key part of a liberating educational process , O'Donohue expresses this very beautifully:

> The imagination, in contrast [to the mind], extends a greater hospitality to whatever is awkward, paradoxical or contradictory... the imagination... does not perceive contradictions as the enemy of truth; rather it seems here an interesting intensity (2004, p. 138).

The necessarily collaborative nature of that process meant that we had to work as a group, and as subgroups or 'cells'. As the project began to gain traction, the men developed a very strong loyalty to it, as I did myself, and many of the men tended to come along to each filming session, even though they were not 'acting' in that scene or even directly involved in working cameras or sound. Perhaps, crucially, the sheer amount of time it actually took to make a 30 minute narrative film (far longer than any of us had 'allocated' as a commitment) meant that we were together in groups and in one to one conversations for long periods, waiting perhaps for another film 'take', driving to another location, or congregating in each others' houses to write and record the music and songs. A supporting, if often bantering, comedic and ludic culture was shaped by us. The playfulness which invited transgression of traditional boundaries, crossing of borders, contradiction and irony was a key to 'getting over and beyond' the menaces of collusive idealisation and denunciatory fragmentation was perhaps the most important form of resilience and collective empowerment. The function of the ludic is not always recognised in education, but Conroy has presented a case for the humanising potential of such an approach (1999). We were becoming a community where not everything was 'handled' collectively, but which nonetheless operated collectively towards some common goal – a community which was comically hospitable to the 'otherness' within each individual, and had the maturity, the wit, to accommodate it. As one of the men expressed it:

> The project was a blank canvas. It was a struggle for us to get our heads round how we could ever make an eight minute film... by the time we got motoring with the film, some of the men were getting worried about the lighting in each shot! Not that they did not get slagged [bantered, teased] about that. And that shows how much confidence they had gained.

It was not, I think, entirely co-incidental that the first scene the men put together was the wake scene – a situation characterised by the sorrow afflicting individuals, supported and dignified by a collective encircling hospitality, both practical and ritualistic; a space where sorrow and laughter meet. One of the men afterwards reflected that there were thirty or more people involved in that scene, evidence to him of how the project engaged with the wider community around Crossmaglen.

In pedagogic terms, the relatively sustained nature of the process of putting together the film allowed for a great variety of learning methodologies to be enacted. At the beginning, while the learning environment was informal and participative, conversational, dialogic, it would be fair to say that the 'experts' did initially more of the talking within the sessions. This maybe allowed participants to focus their questions and comments based on what they were hearing. This was mostly 'whole group' work. When we began the filming, the storyboarding was 'kickstarted' by a couple of people, and that made a sort of base for other people to work from. With the actual filming, the learning curve was very steep as the tutor spent a very short time talking and engaged us straight away almost in hands-on learning, like working booms, walking different ranges of shots, seeing what they looked like through the camera. The tutor kept asking the men how do you want to do this? And, at the start, they would say, it's up to you, boss. But, after a while, the men began to get more confidence in taking responsibility and to uncover roles for themselves.

The participants not only drew on the skills they already had, their latent know how and expertise (one of the reasons why they chose to start with the wake scene), but discovered much. And that expansion of knowledge and skill has about it something that is fundamentally educational, but also fundamental to any notion of community making.

Local people became aware of the film, partly because some of those involved brought us back to their own houses to film or to work on the music. We were received with great courtesy and forbearance by the families, whose homes we invaded. And this afforded further opportunities, for small conversations about the project and the difficult topics it was broaching.

We launched the film towards the end of 2009. Many local people came and one man, a musician and the father of one of the actors, said to me, 'it was very educational'. It was clear that he had enjoyed watching the film, even though it was quite tough in places, that he was proud of his son, and of seeing Crossmaglen up there on the screen, in all its beauty, seen from the inside, free of pastoral and cultural stereotypes of soldiers and bandits and featuring characters that were not talked about, that were not like us, but different.

For the men, it is evident from the evaluation that it was, for many of them transformative. That is a very big word. The project has not transformed the world, but it did, according to the men themselves, have a very positive impact on them in a number of ways. Here are some of the things they said.

'I had a chance to try something I never thought I could ever do'. 'I got more confidence'.'I was more willing to talk about mental problems'. 'I know now that there are supports, both in terms of services and from people in our own community'.

> It was not like what we were used to. A lot of the men had left school early and did not have a good experience of education. The fact that it was very informal suited the men; it was more about action and spoken words and music than about traditional methods of education.

> The reason progress was made was that there was a trusting, fear-free forum for the men to talk openly. The people who came among us to talk about their experiences were very open too. They were really great because they let us inside their world.

The fact that the men succeeded in making a film let them know a lot more about themselves and the place they lived, and they discovered that it was ok to open up and it was also ok to take a big risk and have a go at something you have never tried before.

Most striking was that many of the men testified to how the project empowered them, gave them a sense of solidarity, a network, a supporting structure, both in terms of knowing about how to access official support but how to look about, ask for help and how to help other people in the community. And, as the film itself revealed, this structure was fragile, not always equal to the task, mocking and hard-edged, limited, amateurish (including the health care professionals), hesitant, problematic, jagged.

Conclusion

I have tried to suggest how an education in the community project can interrogate, disrupt and deconstruct concepts of community and in the process can offer a third concept or model which does not synthesise the two dominant 'ideologies', but accommodates them, in a spirit of radical uncertainty. This makes the foundation for a genuine and deep annunciation which is, I have learned, a crucial form of real community making. The participants, all of us there, as people living in what had been defined by the dominant culture as a marginal place, 'an otherworld', had to negotiate our way through a lot of received and unquestioned concepts of 'community' to get to a space where we could acknowledge the contradictions in ourselves, as well as in the dominant culture. We had to produce our own new meanings, learn ourselves and also, imaginatively learn that the 'otherness' of those marginalised by mental distress had been constructed by us as a dominant culture. The two research journeys were related and perhaps one could not have taken place without the other, we all had to deconstruct our sense of ourselves as rural people, to feel confident and open enough to confront the more difficult issue of how we ourselves had marginalised people with mental distress. That was a real education, and an education for change. In making the film, the men were able to transact complex and contradictory concepts of community. And to go further than a mere intellectual learning. By making a film, the men were able to imagine their way into, inhabit the 'other' of the lived experience of mental distress far more fully than all the lectures in the world could have done. And, in making that film, the men bore witness to a new understanding which they were prepared to place before their community, in the hope that that community could also imaginatively engage with and learn and, as a result, act in ways that were more compassionate and supportive to people with mental distress.

I have tried also to demonstrate community making as a process as much as a product. But the product is important too, for it is the fruits – the 'findings' and the 'recommendations', which emerge from a very deep and layered educational process. That process is based upon a Freirian model of learning as challenging, painful, autocritical, democratic, dialogical, shared, imaginative, creative, resourceful, innovative, liberating, ludic and above all hospitable. That is a very old virtue, still held dear by people in South Armagh, for all the 'invasions' from without and within. I have tried to illustrate through my account of this project that the deconstruction and questioning of the two different concepts of community I adumbrated in the first section, was vital to the learning process, because it resulted in the participants liberating themselves from a series of received truths. That, in turn, gave them a place and a space to construct, to create a new concept of community characterised by compassion, honesty and resilience (at least now and then).The making of the film was the medium for this deconstruction and construction, rather than the more usual medium of academic argumentation which is the nadir of an orthodox pedagogy. Could the men have genuinely engaged with an orthodox pedagogy? Would they? Was the creative,

imaginative approach, the making of a film, the only way for them to have tackled the university accredited 'course' or was the making of the film the richest way for anybody to tackle that course?

The model of learning I have tried to describe could be characterised as partial, unstable, uncertain, imperfect and subject to interrogation. And that was maybe because we deployed a critical pedagogy about concepts like 'community'. Questioning, interrogation, disruption were encouraged.

But, as the men recognised, for change to occur in themselves and in their community, that sort of approach was necessary. I do not think any of us would be prepared to make extravagant claims for what we did and how we did it as a paradigm breaker in community making. But, I do believe that the imaginative construction that was the film could not have been built without that deeply critical process. The film itself bears the tracks of it; it is no worthy campaign piece, but a work propelled by a dynamic of questions, doubts, stupidities, wrong turns and finally, a partial and uncertain optimism. That optimism is generated through the imaginative dramatisation of what is essentially a process of learning. If the film has any message, it is that we can learn to make community, if only in a small way.

The last word should go to one of the men: 'Talking to the lads, I know they were very happy with what they achieved and would be keen to do more projects like this'.

Note

[1] The British financial crash occurring in 1720 after the South Sea Company had taken over national debt in return for trade monopoly over the south seas.

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