Abstract

The dominant discourse of lifelong learning is a political rather than an educational discourse which enables the deconstruction of welfare to be effected through the reconstruction of citizenship. Democratic citizenship properly understood, on the other hand, depends on determined progress towards a more equitable distribution of material and cultural resources among citizens. Education on its own can do little to ensure that such structural change takes place. It is, nevertheless, the task of critical adult education, as distinct from economistic models of lifelong learning, to raise such questions as urgent issues for democratic deliberation and debate, and to expand our notions of what it means to be active citizens in a democratic society.

Citizens are people who make and respond to political arguments and who make political choices. And if citizenship is primarily a political category, it is important not to shy away from the politics of citizenship and the conditions in which we are expected to act as citizens. In this sense, thinking about citizenship is one way of beginning the larger task which is, in Zygmunt Bauman's words, to ‘re-invent politics’, a process which has to be ‘cared for and cultivated in company with others’. Implicit in this is the view that the political expression of citizenship is fundamentally a moral activity in which we collectively argue about the relationship between means and ends. Without this constant and continuous re-invention of the political, societies become morally bankrupt. It is essential for the health of democracy that the educational space for this creative, democratic work be cherished and expanded.

What is required, in the first instance, is a much more open, democratic and imaginative dialogue and debate about what kind of society we want to live in, and how we can begin to build it. Adult education and lifelong learning can contribute to making this vision a reality, and they are a rich resource for tackling significant problems in society. Ordinary people need the opportunity to have their say, to be listened to and to talk back to the state. This is essentially a democratic process. It cannot simply be managed and measured; it has to be nurtured and cultivated in communities. It requires faith and trust in people, and a valuing of genuinely democratic dialogue and debate.

Adult Education, Citizenship and Democracy: Personal reflections on changes and continuities in context and argument

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Ian Martin was the first non-American academic to receive the Cunningham Award for Social Justice at the north American Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) in 2000 for his paper 'Reconstituting the agora: towards an alternative politics of lifelong learning'. To mark his contribution to the literature of adult education and lifelong learning, the UK Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA) has recently established the annual Ian Martin Award for Social Justice. He was born and brought up in India and has worked extensively in central and southern Africa.