Each of us a star in the night sky: forming constellations of practice to reimagine equality and diversity in Further Education and Adult and Community Learning

Report of the Equality and Diversity Working Group

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Abstract
This article presents findings from our working group at Reimagine FE 2018, which sought to ‘reimagine’ equality and diversity (E&D) practices in further education (FE) and adult and community learning (ACL). Inspiration for our group stemmed from findings from our recent outstanding teaching, learning and assessment (OTLA) action research project, funded by the Education and Training Foundation, which
suggested a need for collaborative spaces, or ‘constellations of practice’ (Mycroft and Sidebottom, 2018), where teachers can openly discuss E&D issues and their own positionality, without fear of ‘opening a can of worms’ or ‘getting it wrong’ with learners. Our group identified three key messages: the importance of finding the human story, how sharing something of ourselves can enhance our teaching practices and the importance of acknowledging and challenging structural inequalities within our education systems. We envisioned our working group as the beginning of these conversations for our settings, as we develop and form fresh constellations within our own organisations (and beyond).

**Key words:** equality and diversity, E&D, collaborative spaces, constellations of practice, positionality
**Introduction**
This article presents findings from our working group, which sought to ‘reimagine’ equality and diversity (E&D) practices in further education (FE) and adult and community learning (ACL). Inspiration for our group stemmed from findings from our recent outstanding teaching, learning and assessment (OTLA) action research project, funded by the Education and Training Foundation, which suggested a need for collaborative spaces where teachers can openly discuss E&D issues and their own positionality, without fear of ‘opening a can of worms’ or ‘getting it wrong’ with learners. As such, we hoped to create room during our working group for collaborative dialogue in relation to what E&D might look like, and more importantly, how it might feel, if it became released from policy constraints and educational agendas that facilitate tick box approaches to ‘doing’ E&D. We wondered therefore what it might be like to ‘reimagine’ E&D working practices that are learner driven, based on conversations about learners’ lives and their communities, rather than driven by the interests of individual staff members or E&D leads. We wondered whether, by engaging in symbiotic knowledge exchange between learners, teachers and educational support staff, gaps in everyone’s understanding could be better acknowledged and addressed, as learners and staff drew upon one another’s experiences as a means of expanding individual perspectives and developing empathy. Finally, we wondered how it might feel if we all engaged in proactive exploration and contribution towards E&D’s promotion and celebration, ultimately by re-centring E&D in teaching, learning and assessment, rather than leaving it languishing on the outskirts of our everyday practice.

**Conceptual framework and contextual underpinnings**
As a conceptual framework, to help us express the way each person in a learning situation can contribute to our understanding of E&D issues and share their diverse life experiences, we introduced the working group to the metaphorical idea of ‘constellations of practice’ (Mycroft and Sidebottom, 2018). Hereby, “people come together …, gathering around shared drive and energy for a limited period of time” (ibid, p.171). Like Mycroft and Sidebottom, we were attracted by this metaphor because it helped to express how people, like stars in a night sky, can form a ‘picture’, or constellation, when connected together. Also, one person’s ‘little bear’ is another’s ‘upside-down kite’ and someone else’s ‘wheelbarrow’.
In other words, we all see the world in different ways, and we are able to draw on these different perspectives to promote equality and celebrate diversity if we engage people in sharing their worlds with each other. Furthermore, if these constellations lead to changed E&D practices, as we saw in the North East OTLA group, we could see them as ‘communities of praxis’ (ibid). Hereby, praxis is seen as “history making action” (Kemmis 2010, p. 9, quoted in Mahon et al, 2016): “Praxis which can be enacted by people individually or collectively, involves acting in ways that are morally, ethically, and politically responsible, and acting with awareness that when we act, we are acting in history, changing the world around us, even if only in small ways.” (Mahon et al, p.14). Constellations formed in the North East through our OTLA project have been mediated by technology, in our case an online ‘stickies (Padlet) board’ (see image below). This online space enabled FE and ACL practitioners to collaborate and share ideas for celebrating diversity and promoting equality, the key aims of our work. Alongside classrooms, staff rooms, community and other FE and ACL settings, this Padlet became the space where praxis was enacted. Mycroft and Sidebottom see such online tools as ‘constellations in action’ (2018, p.173) and, by sharing the Padlet with our new constellation at Reimagining
FE, we hoped to connect practitioners in the North East with potential new collaborators from around the country.

Image credit: Padlet Screenshot (2018)

**Discussing the issues**
The Reimagining FE working group offered an invaluable opportunity for practitioners to come together to form a new constellation that connected E&D theory and practice across a diverse range of settings, sectors and geographical locations. Many of the individual stars that made up this constellation were already shining brightly within their own organisations; coming together enabled individual expertise to both intertwine and offer challenge, launching a multitude of thoughts, ideas and reflections into orbit as the day progressed. We acknowledged that, having chosen to participate in this working group, many of us already felt confident in our E&D practices, perhaps more so than other colleagues not present in the room. As such, we agreed there is an urgent need for opportunities like this across our sector, particularly if we are to move away from approaching E&D with fear and rigidity, and progress from commonly-cited assumptions that if ‘we know about the nine protected characteristics’
and 'treat everybody the same', then we are working without prejudice and fulfilling our duty under the (2010) Equality Act.

During the day, we discussed how the discomfort felt by many in relation to their E&D practice speaks, perhaps, to its inherently messy nature. E&D doesn't fit neatly into lesson plans, it's unpredictable, and at times, it feels subjective. This can render staff uncertain about what to do or how to approach E&D, particularly where issues raised feel far-removed from their own expertise or detached from the socio-cultural contexts of their own lives and experiences. Concerns also arose in relation to 'shoehorning' E&D into lessons, or diluting subject-specific content with 'the E&D part'. Often these concerns boil down to lack of time; to conceptualise, to prepare, to engage wholeheartedly in prevailing issues and debates. In some cases, we felt there may also be lack of willing, as some fail to see the relevance of E&D issues that feel far removed from the everyday happenings of their classrooms or workshops. In other cases, we felt staff do make these connections, yet nevertheless render E&D work best left in the hands of specialist practitioners. The marketisation of FE (Coffield, 2008) and the neoliberal political underpinnings of the last two decades that have enabled and encouraged such marketisation (Kulz, 2017; Raey, 2012) have also placed staff under an ever-increasing pressure to 'progress' learners academically, with 'academic progress' measured most often by the achievement of qualifications. Focus sits therefore within the realm of 'learning outcomes' and 'assessment criteria', with less attention paid to more holistic elements of teaching and learning, including harnessing opportunities to proactively support our learners to become empathetically-minded, politically-engaged, socially-conscious citizens.

Reimagining E&D: Emerging findings from our constellation of practice

Our working group sought to reimagine working practices in FE and ACL that recentralised E&D and championed socially-just educational praxis. Mirroring the OTLA Padlet, praxis was enacted during the day through the collaborative creation of a group 'thought wall'. Each time an idea was discussed or actions were identified, we added to our 'wall' (see image below). During the conference, we were tasked with constructing three key messages to share with all conference participants at the end of the day. Below we discuss the core findings that emerged from our process of
collaborative E&D reimagination, articulated (as they were on the day), as take-home messages for participants to further explore within their own contextual settings.

Image credit: Members of the E&D working group presenting our key messages

1. Finding the human story
The first message to emerge from our working group was the importance of finding the human story in our E&D work. We discussed how human stories enable a point of connection, helping develop empathy and fostering personal investment in global concerns. We discussed ‘human stories’ in relation to our own lives and learning communities, considering how ‘one situation’ or ‘one learner’s experience, shared with us’, can facilitate shifts in both thinking and practice as we reconceptualise and recalibrate our existing understanding to incorporate that which becomes meaningful to us. Storytelling is a tacit aspect of human nature, and people may relate to human stories more readily than ‘theoretical' approaches to E&D, such as learning the protected characteristics by rote. This is because stories carry the power to impact upon us emotionally, or through the affective (emotional) domain, which Vroom's 'Expectancy Theory' (1964) posited is at the heart of motivation to learn.

What it means to ‘find the human story’ was explored in different ways as the day progressed. We discussed, for example, the use (and abuse) of human stories within the media, considering how a single image or a few words can affect public perception
of global issues. Sometimes these portrayals reinforce marginality and stigma, as individuals are demonised or responsibilised for structural issues well beyond their control. On other occasions however, media portrayals of human stories can result in the empathetic connection of people across the globe, as we are invited into the lives of those whom we may previously have felt distant from or unsure of. We discussed some of these powerful human stories, and how, when we are able to relate these stories back to our own lives, our own families, our own communities, our E&D work gains momentum, taking on fresh energy as we actively seek opportunities to discuss, debate, to share.

2. Sharing something of ourselves

Following on from finding the human story, we discussed how, in order to explore such stories effectively within our E&D practice, we must not only become open to hearing these stories in the first place, we must also (where appropriate) become willing to share something of ourselves with our learners and with our colleagues too. Sharing something of ourselves does not mean we need to lay our own lives bare, but it can be beneficial to show our humanity, to model our empathy, to demonstrate how we are affected by the world around us. One of our group described this process as creating ‘brave spaces’ in our teaching and learning communities. Brave spaces become those places therefore where respectful relationships enable complex issues to be openly and freely discussed. Such spaces help combat our fear of asking and our fear of responding, as environments are nurtured where we each feel empowered to dig into E&D’s crevices, extrapolating rather than burying its complexities. This also includes exploring rather than shutting down points of disagreement. As Rowe-Finkbeiner (2018) asserts, talking at the point of disagreement is where ‘true openings can happen’.
Brave spaces have potential therefore to empower learners and staff alike, as teaching and learning communities are reimagined as spaces of social, empathetic progress, as well as academic, personal progress. Such spaces are vitally important in both our learning spaces and staff rooms if we truly wish to reimagine E&D practices that move beyond surface level enquiry or the constant provision of stock answers whenever tricky or difficult issues arise. Reimagining our practice in such a way means altering the dynamics between ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’, as we open up space for learners to offer their own challenge, insight and expertise, accepting that we may not always be the expert in the room. We discussed the importance of not singling people out due to their ‘E&D visibility’. For example, assuming that a colleague or peer with a physical disability is an expert on special education needs when, in fact, they may have no such needs themselves. Everyone has a protected characteristic and people’s lived experiences are rarely obvious. Brave spaces provide opportunities for learners to ask the questions that trouble or confuse them, and values responses from staff that acknowledge, ‘we may not always know the answer, but we can always explore together’. Reimagining E&D this way requires us to manage our own uncomfortable feelings and points of disagreement as we engage in processes of critical debate, self-reflection and self-critique in relation to our own privilege. This is not an easy task, but if we are to affect change within our settings, and indeed, society at large, it is a vitally important one.
3. Challenging structural inequalities
We discussed how, in order to make progress in each of these ways; finding the human story, understanding our own confirmation bias’ and creating brave spaces for open, non-judgemental dialogue, we must first recognise and understand how inequalities according to race, class, gender and ability are systematically reproduced within education, underpinned by meritocratic ideals of education as a ‘level playing field’ and that ‘if you work hard enough, anyone can achieve’. Acknowledging and understanding the racist, classist, heteronormative, abilist and sexist underpinnings of our education system enables us to challenge from within, provides us opportunity to move away from ‘treating everyone the same’ and enables us to reflect upon the harm caused to learners when we pathologise their failure or success. As bell-hooks (1994) describes it, if we are to teach the practice of freedom, we must first teach our learners to transgress.

Continuing the conversation
In order to sustain our constellation of reimagined E&D practice beyond the remit of the day, we elected to continue sharing practice, ideas and challenge virtually via a new Padlet\(^1\), which we agreed could be linked to the original online space used by the NE OTLA group. The hope was that our shared Padlet board would not only support us to remain connected to one another, but also enable new constellations to form, as new stars from our own settings were invited to collaborate and share in the reimagining process, as well as links to existing constellations made. As such, fresh constellations can be continually formed and reformed, as we support one another to reimagine E&D practices in FE and ACL.

Conclusion
This article has explored how we sought to reimagine E&D practices in FE and ACL during Reimagining FE 2018 and further build on the E&D constellations formed in the North East. We discussed the importance of coming together in collaborative practice, and how forming constellations of practice across settings has potential to enrich and inspire individual approaches to E&D as well as provide crucial spaces for engagement with complex issues. We developed three take-home messages to

\(^1\) See https://padlet.com/c_collins2/ReImag2018
share at the end of the day; finding the human story, sharing something of ourselves and challenging structural inequality. Readers are encouraged to explore these themes within the context of their own settings, and form their own constellations of practice within which to reimagine E&D in FE and ACL.

References


