COLLABORATION AND LEARNING IN COMMUNITY INTEGRATION: SHIFTING THE FOCUS

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Discourses around migration create a hostile environment, positioning migrants as posing problems for host countries. Language education for migrants is seen as a solution and as a main route to integration. Evidence from research and practice, however, suggests that such education is not sufficient to promote community integration. Even with good language skills, barriers to full participation remain because learning and adaptation by both newcomers and host communities is required. Drawing on social theory, research and a practical example of a local *Cultural Connections* project, I discuss the educational value for both host and migrant communities of collaborative work which brings people together. I argue that if we are to more effectively promote equality in cohesive and welcoming communities, there should be more focus on the learning opportunities and benefits for all participants—not just for migrants, who are usually the target of policy and practice.

Keywords: *community learning, ESOL, Foucault, integration, migration, Rancière*

Language and communication are important aspects in the processes of integration and in developing vibrant and cohesive communities at a time of rising global migration. Language education has a crucial role to play but one which needs to be approached critically if we are to avoid reproducing the inequalities experienced by migrants. The opportunity offered by this special issue to consider how English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) can be reshaped is an exciting one. It is an opportunity to consider beyond how we might do *better* to also think how we might do *differently*. As language educators we tend to look to how we can improve language education by changes in our classroom approaches and techniques. This is important and there is much work to be done to develop language teaching and learning that is more focused on what people need to be able to do in the language. There is a growing realisation, however, that language education may not be sufficient for integration and that learning and development on the part of the wider community, employers and public services is also important (Chick & Hannagan Lewis, 2020; Doyle, 2015; Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). How migrants, whether economic or forced, are currently perceived is one of the barriers that needs to be overcome. Another is in expanding the communication abilities and experiences of people in the host communities so that they can connect with and learn from difference, and to see the other as an equal rather than as a problem.

In this paper, I draw on my experience as an ESOL practitioner, on research and on social theory to examine some of the barriers to integration and to consider how we can start to work collaboratively to overcome them more effectively. I begin by looking at the dominant discourses of migration and integration, highlighting how migrants are typically positioned as people to be feared, resented and as problems to be solved rather than as equals who bring with them experiences and knowledge that can contribute to the development of richer, more diverse communities. I then consider how migrants often

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report dissatisfaction with the ESOL provision that is seen as a solution to their problems of integration. While many wish to connect with the wider community, socially and in terms of employment, they can be held back in language classes and deemed not yet ready to participate. I share an example of a project developed locally to start to foster connections, highlighting the educational value for both migrants and host communities. I argue for bringing people together to learn about, with and from each other as a matter of policy, rather than depending on the energy of volunteer initiatives.

Discourses of Migration and Integration

Power, according to Foucault (1979), works through our discursive practices—the words we use and the actions we take—regulating and institutionalising 'ways of talking, thinking and acting' (Jager & Maier, 2009, p. 35). Through what we say, write and do, power produces the reality and shapes the societal structures in which we live. Much of our understanding of migrants comes from how they are discussed in the media, in reports of policy developments, incidents involving people from other countries, and the problems associated with migration. A study of the coverage of immigration in the British national press found that the predominantly negative portrayal of migrants as 'illegal immigrants' or 'failed asylum seekers' matched public perceptions and may account for public opposition to immigration (Blinder & Allen, 2015). The authors suggest that the media constructs immigration in 'selective and incomplete ways' (p. 31) and it is from these partial constructions that the public comes to understand the issues. The consequences of this go beyond a skewed understanding, however. These negative images of migrants can 'create a climate of fear, posing an obstacle to full integration' (p. 32). UK policy, which aims to limit the number of people coming to the country or the support they can expect to receive when here, further undermines the attempts to integrate (Strang & Ager, 2010).

Migration and integration policies identify what it means to be 'British' and aim to bring migrants in line with 'our' values and customs. Citizenship courses available to newcomers 'set about defining who "we" are in terms of "them" ' (McPherson, 2010, p. 554). And, as Strang and Ager (2010) point out, 'to define migrants (economic or forced) as "other" immediately locates them as the "problem" ' (p. 593). It sets up a binary of us and them, of citizens and immigrants, of British and others. This encourages us to see each side as a homogenous group since such binary oppositions are 'open to the charge of being reductionist and over-simplified' (Hall, 2001). They are rarely neutral. One pole of a binary is generally dominant (Derrida, 2004). Writing such binaries as **white**/black and **men**/women would better capture the power in the relationship (Hall, 2001). This is reflected in Foucault's (1979) concept of disciplinary power which 'establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them' (p. 184). Migrants are currently differentiated in this way and it is their visibility which 'assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in [their] subjection' (p. 187).

In the case of migrants, they are the ones who are made visible through media attention and policy initiatives. According to McPherson (2010),

> In migration policy climates that privilege conformance by 'outsiders' as the path to social cohesion, migrants and refugees are represented as problematic, deficient and in need of changing. Citizenship tests and language education classes are the panacea: vehicles through which 'our values' are taught, and through which problematic migrant subjectivities can ostensibly be rectified. (p. 546)

The discourses constrain migrants' understanding of who they are in their new surroundings. Cederberg's (2014) consideration of the biographical narratives of migrants in Sweden shows how dominant discourses may normalise lived experiences of inequality and how they may therefore 'contribute to the reproduction of inequalities' (p. 133). Cederberg highlights how migrants orient towards the dominant discourses regarding the responsibility of migrants to integrate themselves. One migrant in

the study is reported as dismissing the idea that migrants are excluded from Swedish society, asserting instead that they exclude themselves by not making Swedish friends. Yet, she later explains how it is difficult for her to make friends and suggests that Swedish society is closed. As Cederberg sums up, '[the woman] recounts experiencing problems in making friends with Swedish people, but nonetheless blames other migrants for only socialising within their own ethnic groups' (p. 141). This is reminiscent of what I have heard from ESOL learners. The sense of individual responsibility to learn English and to become part of UK society means that difficulties integrating can be perceived as personal failure.

While integration has been recognised as a 'two-way process' (Strang & Ager, 2010, p. 601) and 'multi-dimensional' (European Council on Refugees and Exiles [ECRE], 1999, p. 29), it is usually only those new to a country who are the target of policy interventions and research rather than the community into which they are trying to integrate. As de Lima and Wright (2009) point out, adaptation is required 'on the part of both migrants and local communities' but that 'much of the research has tended to focus exclusively on the perspectives and experience of migrants' (p. 400).

Barriers to Integration

It is becoming increasingly evident that language learning among migrants—whilst extremely important—may not be sufficient in fostering integration and social cohesion. One of the goals of learning English frequently expressed by the ESOL learners I have worked with was to make friends and to become more fully part of the local area. However, despite improving their English, the learners still expressed difficulties in getting to know people socially. One group said, *'Scottish people are very friendly but they do not take us into their groups'.* Similarly, de Lima and Wright (2009) report that while migrants 'commented on the friendliness of local people, most also stated they did not engage in social activities' (p. 399). Research into the language learning needs and integration support for Syrian refugees in Ireland found that despite a strong desire to build relationships with Irish people, there was 'little social mixing among Syrians and local people' (Ćatibušić et al., 2021, p. 26). Syrian women were aware of people being afraid of them when they walked in the street because of how they dressed and were keen that people get to know them and see that they are good people. In research reported by Chick and Hannagan Lewis (2020), language learning is seen as the route to integration, but even after achieving advanced levels, refugee research participants still struggled to find work.

Language learning provision may itself be a barrier which delays rather than fosters integration. While often less formal than other educational experiences, much ESOL work is still situated at the more formal end of the formal/informal learning continuum (Colley et al., 2003). People are assessed and assigned to levels through which they progress, from the 'basics' to more advanced language, often with exams to pass along the way. There is the understanding that they have to do this; they have to progress if they are to succeed in integrating, learning the grammar and the vocabulary that is served up to them. It takes a long time, longer than they would have hoped—in fact, for many, up to six years of part-time lessons of 300 hours a year (Schellekens, 2001). When they leave the classroom, they can find that the language they have learned does not help them in the world beyond it and so they return, declaring themselves not quite ready and often, as many practitioners will have experienced, self-diagnosing the need for more grammar.

In addition to the lack of support in second language acquisition (SLA) research for the value of breaking language up into lexis and structures to be delivered at specific levels (Long et al., 2019), such progression through levels can also be seen, according to Rancière (2010), as the 'art of limiting the transmission of knowledge, of organising delay, of deferring equality' (p. 9). Chick and Hannagan Lewis (2020) found that migrants were frustrated at having to spend so much time in formal learning before they could participate more fully. They report that 'some were disillusioned by the thought of spending hours, and quite possibly years, in class preparing for exams that seemed unrelated to their career aims or progress toward self-sufficiency' (p. 11). Language taught is often simplified so that it is seen as being

appropriate for lower levels and, in the process, the language introduced to learners does not resemble language as it is actually used. For example, Long (2015) recorded the interactions which took place at the ticket window of a railway station in rural America. The word 'ticket' was very unlikely to be used by passengers when purchasing one. Long points out that the only person to use 'ticket' was also the only non-native speaker. He wondered 'if she had been the innocent victim of [language teaching] based on material writers' intuitions' (p. 189). While it is essential to have a good understanding of language and of SLA for high quality language education, we may also need, as Foley (1999) urges, 'to break out of the strait-jacket which identifies adult education and learning with institutionalised provision and course-taking' (p. 6). In the next section, I discuss one way in which we could start to do this.

Cultural Connections **in Strathearn**

In Scotland, the refugee integration strategy sets out a vision of Scotland as a 'country that values diversity, where people are able to use and share their culture, skills and experiences, as they build strong relationships and connections'. The strategy also recognises that integration is a 'long-term, two-way process, involving positive change in both individuals and host communities' leading to 'cohesive, diverse communities' (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 10). It is important, therefore, to consider how we might achieve this, and here I describe one possible solution. Although this is a local project, what we have learned from it could inform wider work which is of benefit and use, not just to migrants, but to whole communities and policy makers.

As an Adult Literacies and ESOL Worker in a rural town in Scotland, I worked with a wide range of people comprising both those who had spent most of their lives in the local area and those who had moved to Scotland from non-English-speaking countries. Conversations revealed that people lacked confidence in interacting with speakers of other languages and were concerned about the possibility of communication difficulties. I came to understand that there were two important issues to be addressed. One was the wariness and fear of migrants created by the negative discourses. The other was local people's lack of confidence in, and thus avoidance of, communication with speakers of other languages. To start to remove the barriers locally, a Community Learning and Development (CLD) colleague, Pam Armstrong, and I collaborated to develop a community project. What began as an idea to bring together two groups of learners to teach and learn ceilidh dancing (Scottish social dancing) soon grew into our *Cultural Connections* project to create spaces for diverse sections of the community to interact and to learn about, with and from each other.

The Project

The project pilot consisted of four social events: a ceilidh, a world food night, a singing workshop and a beetle drive. The main aim in each event was to facilitate connections between people through reducing barriers, maximising participation and making a space for learning. At the ceilidh, for example, we had a live band with a caller. It is the caller's role to make sure everyone knows how to do the dances, calling out what to do at each stage. For those who might not be able to understand these instructions, we made sure that there were enough people who knew the dances well and could guide others. Many ceilidh dances require people to dance with new people as the dance progresses. People work together to make sure everyone is going in the right direction. This first event of our pilot project was very popular, with almost 80 people attending. There was a good mix of people from both the local area and the migrant population and it provided an environment where people could have a good time with others of different ages, backgrounds, nationalities, languages, experiences, abilities and beliefs. We gathered feedback at the end of the first evening. People could give written or oral feedback in English or another language. The feedback informed the next three activities, one of which was a world food night where there were more opportunities for people to use and develop their communication skills, to learn more about each other and to contribute to the event as equal participants. Everyone was invited to share a favourite recipe

and these were brought together in a *Cultural Connections* recipe book. In the ESOL sessions beforehand, we prepared by thinking about what kinds of questions could be asked, possible responses and how to start conversations. To support interaction and the sharing of experiences on the night, we placed 'conversation coasters' on the tables. The coasters were laminated cards with simple questions to prompt conversation. The singing workshop was offered by one of the participants who had attended the ceilidh. People had the opportunity to learn songs in Scots and Gaelic. Gaelic was new to all participants and so people from different backgrounds learned together. The final event of this pilot stage was a beetle drive, a social game that is popular in Scotland. Essentially, people race to draw a beetle but can only add each part if they roll the corresponding number on the dice, after having rolled a 6 to start. It is very visual and not much language is required to be able to take part effectively. We used pictures to explain the game and people could help each other if needed. As at the ceilidh, people start with people they feel comfortable with but once the game gets going, people move to other tables. People mixed as the game progressed, seeing familiar faces from previous events and meeting new people. As they moved around, they shared a bit about their languages, mostly how to say hello, goodbye and count to six. Following the evaluation of the first four events, the project moved into more sustainable, longer-term activities, working with a wider range of partners. These included group walks with the local countryside ranger and photography workshops with a youth worker. There was also a very popular twice weekly Conversation Café where people of different ages, backgrounds and nationalities regularly came together continuing to learn about, with and from each other. Workers from other services were welcome to come along to these cafés, but as participants rather than with an agenda. At all times, the focus was on the equal participation of all. While my colleague and I were paid workers, all the participants were on an equal footing. We did not have some who were 'volunteers', while others were 'migrants' (or 'disadvantaged people', 'people with learning disabilities', or 'mental health issues', or 'older people', or whichever other label can be used). It was recognised that all participants had something to gain and something to contribute.

The Educational Value of Bringing People Together

Evaluation of the *Cultural Connections* project and the Conversation Café, through participant feedback, photos, practitioner observation and reflection, highlighted the educational value of bringing people together. People appreciated the opportunities to get to know new people and to learn about different customs and traditions. There was a real sense that people had not had such opportunities prior to this and were keen that they could continue to do so. One woman from Poland at the ceilidh said that she had been *'waiting for this evening for four years.'* From both language learning and integration perspectives, opportunities to meet others are important but not common. For example, participants in Sorgen's (2015) study highlight the importance of having somewhere to go and to be with others but that for many 'there "is nowhere, nowhere to go and talk to people" ' (p. 250). Morrice et al. (2019) contrasted the experiences of a young Ethiopian refugee who had places to go and friends to help him learn English with the experiences of his parents, who did not have such opportunities, *'they can't go out and have a cup of tea or something like that . . . I don't think they've got the time or the friends'.*

As the *Cultural Connections* project developed into weekly opportunities to meet people, ESOL learners had valuable exposure and opportunities to use English. Between eight and twenty people met up weekly, with a good mix of migrants and people from the local area. Those learning English picked up words and phrases that might not come up in a more formal language learning environment. They also taught some of their own languages. A man from Poland said,

> *It's very good! I'm learning a lot of new English words and teaching Polish words. I'm very happy to meet new people who I learn new phrases from like, "What's the point". I'm very happy that I can enjoy chatting and meeting new people . . . and good cake!*

As Cooke et al. (2015) found in their study of participatory ESOL, people discussed topics not usually present in language teaching materials. The learning objectives of more formal situations—language classes and citizenship courses, for example—were achieved informally as people got to know each other. Cadorath and Harris (1988) argue that, 'unplanned situations or unstructured activities can sometimes create more effective, natural, and memorable communicative opportunities' (p. 193). People were motivated to understand and to be understood. As Rancière (1991) writes,

> All their effort, all their exploration, is strained toward this: someone has addressed words to them that they want to recognize and respond to, not as students or as learned [individuals], but as people; in the way you respond to someone speaking to you and not to someone examining you: under the sign of equality (p. 11).

It is important to note that it was not just the newcomers who learned, developed, and changed. One man wrote that he had *'Learnt more in the Connections events than I have in years.'* Those who have lived in the area for much longer developed their abilities to communicate with speakers of other languages. One person commented that before the project she felt nervous when talking to people from other countries but now felt much more confident and happier to engage with different people. Similar increases in confidence were reported by other participants, as in this quote: *'I'm much more confident talking to people from other countries. Before I would have really worried about not being able to understand them but now I enjoy finding ways to make sure we can communicate.'*

Adult literacies learners were able to share their knowledge of the local area and of English and Scots languages. Often marginalised themselves, they started to recognise their own value and to see themselves as people with something to share: *'Found the Tuesday night very good. It helped me work on my social skills, communication, meet new people, and friends, learned new words from different countries. Helped me emotionally as I felt good helping people learn new words and I enjoyed company of people I have never met.'* People new to the area also found out more about local culture, customs, traditions, activities, television programmes, laws, and current affairs. In these two quotes, they show they felt more part of the local community: *'I really enjoy it. Meeting new people is really important to me. I learn a lot of new words and improve my English'; 'I feel closer to my community.'*

Similarly, people with mental health issues talked about increased motivation to join other groups and to take up volunteering opportunities. The topics that arose and the experiences that were shared all represented rich sources of new knowledge and understanding for the participants as they got 'used to one another' through conversation (Appiah, 2006, p. 85). People became more than the label commonly used to describe them. They were more than someone with a learning disability, someone from Poland, someone with mental health issues or more than an older person. They were instead Linda, Piotr, Alistair or Maria. They were accepted by others and increasingly acknowledged themselves as people with something to offer, as people who know things and as people who can learn. Participation facilitated a changing identity as they formed new relationships and new understandings. It encouraged further participation and connections to the wider society.

Shifting the Focus

We are at the stage, with this special issue, where we are being asked to think about how ESOL policy and practice could better facilitate not only language learning but also community integration. To do so, we need to zoom out, as it were, and take in the wider context, recognising the two-way process of integration, focusing not just on the migrants who need to be able to support themselves and their families but also the communities in which they have come to live. We also need to be aware of the ways in which policy and practice constrain who migrants can be, how they are seen and how we understand learning.

Informal Learning

While the project consisted of social events, they were not 'just' social events. Learning and integration processes happened in the connections between people and it is this learning, the informal and implicit, that is important to recognize and make space for. While the value of informal learning is generally acknowledged, we often do not know what to do with it, how to facilitate it and how to measure it. Coffield (2000) suggests that 'the significance of informal learning is recognised, then promptly forgotten and then rediscovered some years later' when practitioners, researchers and policy makers once more admit its importance before proceeding 'to develop policy, theory and practice without further reference to it' (p. 2). A focus on informal and implicit learning is important. What we need to know cannot all be taught (Billet, 2010). Much of what we need to be able to do, such as using language, communicating effectively and getting along with others, can only be learned informally and experientially (Goodey, 2019). It is crucial that we make space, and provide places, for this learning.

Things Can Change

We also need to see people differently. One of the aims of Foucault's (2003) work was to 'create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects' (p. 126). He was interested in the 'dividing practices' whereby the 'subject is either divided inside [themself] or divided from others' and encouraged 'a historical awareness of our present circumstance' (pp. 126–127). A historical awareness is useful because it allows us to see that what we take for granted now has not always been this way. When we realise this, we can imagine and be hopeful that things could be different. Migration can be seen in this way. Alongside the dominant discursive construction of migrants, there are the other more entrenched understandings about the rights that people born in a particular place have over those born elsewhere. It seems acceptable to treat those from other countries differently. We can detain people, refuse them the right to work, limit or withhold benefits and deport them. It seems natural to believe that people from other countries should not have equal access to 'our' resources. It is interesting to note that in the past, people from a different parish were treated in a similar manner. For example, in Scotland, parishes were responsible for their own poor (Smout, 1985). People could be removed from one part of Scotland back to their parish of settlement. Irish or English people who were poor could be removed from Scotland entirely (Hancock, 1871). Just as it is likely to have made sense not to expect one parish to support another's poor in the 1800s, so too it seems to be obvious now that 'we' cannot be expected to support people from other countries.

Foucault (1991) analysed the problematization of concepts through time, and his histories encourage us to recognise that since things 'weren't as necessary as all that' in the past, 'they are not as necessary as all that' now (p. 76). We no longer see people from a different parish as being very different from us or as less deserving of support. It follows, then, that the way migrants and refugees are currently perceived can also change. ESOL researchers, policy makers and practitioners have a role to play in changing the ways in which people are portrayed and the lives they can lead. As Okri (1997) writes, reminiscent of Foucault's concept of discourses, '[W]e live by stories, we also live in them . . . If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives' (n.p.).

Conclusion

Usher and Edwards (1994) suggest that 'with a different discourse and a different set of practices, things could be otherwise' but that, since we are also discursively constructed 'making things otherwise is no easy, once-and-for-all-task' (p. 28). Indeed, as Ball (2013) asserts, the way in which discursive practices operate makes it 'virtually impossible to think outside of them' and that 'to be outside of them is, by definition [. . .] to be beyond comprehension' (p. 20). The work that needs to be done to promote equality and integration is not easy. It will not be enough to assert that migrants deserve to be seen and treated

more positively. It is not, however, an impossible task. Foucault has been criticised for not offering solutions but he explains that his work rests 'on a postulate of absolute optimism' because people, in 'recognizing the relations of power in which they're implicated, have decided to resist or escape them' (Foucault, 1991, as cited in Ball, 2013, p. xi). As the perception and treatment of migration within the UK has changed in the past, so too can the situation change again. Understanding how power circulates, according to Foucault (1979), through discourses and relations, we can work to resist its categorisation and normalisation.

As educators, we need to be aware of the working of power in our interactions with others and how we may position them and ourselves. If we want to promote an alternative understanding of difference and a suspicion of binaries, we have to be careful not to act in ways that continue to marginalise people. It is not enough to include migrants, people with learning disabilities or people with mental health issues in our groups if we are to continue to see them and treat them as they are typically positioned. Similarly, while it might be nice to have Scottish people meet some Polish or Syrian immigrants, unless we can be open to the people beyond the nationalities, we risk enforcing rather than questioning existing categorisation and binaries. For example, informal projects to connect migrants to the wider community often recruit volunteers as representatives of the local community. Volunteers have a lot to gain and learn from participation, as do the migrants. Neither are getting paid for their participation, so why are some seen as volunteers and some not? This distinction subtly communicates that it is the migrants who need to learn and develop; they are the recipients of support, passive rather than active, with little contribution to make. Brookfield (2005) suggests that Foucault helps us to understand that 'apparently liberatory practices can actually work subtly to perpetuate existing power relations' and that participatory approaches of adult educators may actually be reinforcing 'the discriminatory practices they seek to challenge' (p. 148). Asher (2005) reminds us that in opening up new perspectives and offering new opportunities, we 'cannot predict or control the directions in which the students will then progress' (p. 1102). I would hope, however, that by offering learning opportunities as discussed here, we will be increasingly able to see each one of us as deserving a good life and access to resources, regardless of who we are and where we happen to have been born. We may not be able to impose such beliefs and attitudes on others but we can try to foster them through our practice.

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