

Taking Part

to strengthen civil society and to reconstruct democracy
community-based research and learning



Manifesto

Manifesto Summary

Take Part

We are a group of community practitioners, activists, adult educators and academics with shared concerns: to strengthen civil society through community-based research and learning for democracy and social justice. This manifesto sets out our mission and aims: through sharing experiences, providing mutual support and advocating for policy changes for the future, both locally and nationally.

We live in challenging times

Britain is not alone in becoming increasingly polarised in recent years. It is not only that poverty and inequality have been growing. Political polarisation has also been increasing as Far Right politicians exploit people's fears and anxieties, playing on popular feelings of alienation and distrust. 'Fake news' has exacerbated these problems, accompanied by the increasing incidence of hate speech – and hate crime. So how to combat these challenges more effectively?

The logo consists of the words "take" and "part" stacked vertically in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The text is black and is contained within a yellow speech bubble shape that has a small tail pointing towards the bottom right.

Community-based education and development can make significant contributions to addressing these challenges

They can enable communities to identify the underlying causes of their problems, rather than simply blaming 'the other'. Community-based learning and research can build critical knowledge and understanding, providing the basis for developing collective strategies and action for social and environmental justice.

The importance of building and strengthening collaborative networks and partnerships

We are committed to enabling different organisations, civil society organisations and communities to come together, sharing skills and resources and developing projects - to link up with other networks and to find specific spaces for collaboration, building on their experiences of working on practical issues.

We welcome opportunities to collaborate with those who share our commitment to community-based learning and research, building partnerships and sharing experiences in order to strengthen democracy and civil society, working together to promote democratic strategies for social and environmental justice.

The logo consists of the words "take part" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The text is white and is set against a yellow speech bubble background that has a tail pointing towards the bottom right.

The Take Part Network

We are a group of community practitioners, activists, adult educators and academics with shared concerns: to strengthen civil society through community-based research and learning for democracy and social justice. This manifesto sets out our mission and aims: through sharing experiences, providing mutual support and advocating for policy changes for the future, both locally and nationally.

Take Part – Aims and Objectives

To strengthen democracy, promoting solidarity and social justice through: building networks and partnerships, sharing knowledge and experiences, and advocating for the promotion of community-based learning and research



Democracy is in a constant process of reconstruction and, today more than ever, the partnership between university and civil society must play a relevant role to build a sense of hope based on social justice and solidarity real action, reinforcing learning processes for critical understanding of democracy and the value of diversity.

There are all over the world many stories and silences increasing the urgent need to strength democracy and to develop more inclusive society and new narratives building upon learning lessons for active citizenship and enabling communities to develop critical and empowered understandings of democracy. And most importantly countering extremism – (racism/xenophobia/negationist/human rights violations/political parties fail/) exploring issues of diversity, equity and inclusion through to the very practical issues that impact on the way that the average person thinks about what is happening in their lives – which their experiences inform their political views.

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To address the prevalence of democratic discontent making visible the vulnerable reality of civil society and the insufficient support for civil society and citizenship disaffection we need to strengthen democracy and learning for active citizenship in communities; to develop a critical understanding about the meaning and practice of democracy; to enable communities gain more local democratic agency; and to promote public sector/policy reform

There is sufficient evidence to prove that community-based research constitutes essential condition for social transformation and in this way, we would like to make visible the following point:



- **The need for resources for critical community-based learning**

Cost free opportunities for lifelong learning for adults have been reducing, which is obviously exclusionary at a time when so many people are so short of money. And the work that is funded is generally focused on essential skills, which means literacy, numeracy and ESOL. The kind of learning that we would be wanting to promote, critical thinking, developing democratic processes, understanding democracy from the inside out – It's not there. There's a lot of anxiety, apparently, about democratic deficits, but who is actually putting in resources to try to change that?

We start from the importance of linking up and learning from each other. There are so many experiences and tools that we can use including social media, in order to develop critical thinking, helping the wider public, and everyone in general, to be able to look at the reality of things and to develop the ability to understand what's going on in the world. It's also about teaching people about their democratic rights. And this includes learning in ways that recognise the importance of experiential knowledge.

We can also share learning about how we work, the way we talk, for example. And we can share learning about how not to 'over talk', not to use too much academic language. This puts off some people, people who see this as 'not for me' and elitist.

In summary then, this is about community-based learning and sharing that relates to empowerment, critical thinking, challenging hate thinking and so on. Which is very different from the type of task focused learning that has been increasingly emphasised in educational policies and practices.



- **The importance of building networks and partnerships**

We recognise the importance of trying to find ways of creating spaces which can enable different organisations, civil society organisations and communities to come together. To create some sort of collaborative economy, sharing skills and resources and developing projects - to link up with other networks and to find specific spaces for collaboration, building on their experiences of working on practical issues. For example, in Manchester/ Salford groups have been using the methodology of Paulo Freire, starting from the bottom up, focusing on how people are living, and the issues in their lives. This can then move on towards analysing what actions people can take to work for change. It's very much about social justice, empowerment and critical thinking.



- **The need for research and evaluation**

We're bringing people who do research and people who are engaged in community activism together, in order to explore ways of moving forward. How do we demonstrate community empowerment? How do partnerships work effectively and equitably in community hubs, in different contexts? And also, most importantly, what does democracy look like in today's world, given the lack of support for civil society structures and infrastructures? How to address the challenges of democratic discontents?

How can community education and development make a difference, challenging hate speech and extremism, promoting critical thinking, active citizenship and community empowerment? Community activity needs to be underpinned by evaluation and research, building up evidence of what is working in which contexts, strengthening civil society in order to inform policy development.

- **Why active communities are more important than ever**

Active communities are more important than ever in the current context, where we need to counteract the far right's attempts to mobilise popular frustrations with the effects of years of austerity, exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis in more recent times.

- **How community-based education and development can contribute**

Community-based education and development can make significant contributions here, enabling communities to identify the underlying causes of their problems, rather than simply blaming 'the other'.

Community learning approaches can provide the basis for developing collective strategies and action for social and environmental justice. The Take Part project promoted a variety of just such initiatives, demonstrating the effectiveness of participatory, inclusive approaches. Other projects provided further evidence of the contributions that community-based education and development can make to improving lives and communities and encouraging active participation.

- Why this manifesto for community-based education for community-based research and learning?

We live in challenging times. Britain is not alone in becoming increasingly polarised in recent years. It is not only that poverty and inequality have been growing, although these problems have certainly been escalating in the context of austerity. Political polarisation has also been increasing, on a global scale, as Far Right politicians exploit people's fears and anxieties in this precarious climate, playing on popular feelings of alienation and distrust. 'Fake news' has exacerbated these problems, accompanied by the increasing incidence of hate speech – and hate crime. So how to combat these challenges more effectively, promoting more hopeful alternatives for the future?

This is where popular education comes into the frame. Drawing upon decades of experience in this field, a group of adult educators, academics and social activists came together, to share their experiences of learning for active citizenship and democratic social change. We set out to explore the ways in which community-based learning and participatory action research partnerships can contribute to strengthening democracy and promoting social justice and solidarity agendas.

We reflected on what types of learning need to be promoted. We explored the ways in which participatory action research can contribute to this learning for active citizenship. And we considered how active learning for active citizenship can contribute to agendas for democratic renewal and social justice, more widely. This manifesto sets out our joint conclusions, together with our recommendations for taking these conclusions forward. These build upon the recommendations that have already been set out in The Centenary Commission on Adult Education's report, more generally.

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The following section provides more detailed information about the questions that we explored along with further details about the range of experiences that were represented among those who participated in the event.



MANIFESTO

Basic principles and approaches to active learning for active citizenship

- **Critical dialogue- based on mutual respect.** Active learning for active citizenship needs to start from the importance of engaging with learners on the basis of mutual respect, taking account of people's immediate issues and concerns. This is a Freirean approach, drawing upon the theoretical insights that have been developed by Paulo Freire, Orland Fals-Borda and so many others. Their writings have stimulated reflections on ways of applying theory to practice here in Britain.

This approach to learning involves challenging ourselves as well as others, engaging in processes of critical dialogue, based on mutual respect. This is about questioning our current situations and our previous assumptions and prejudices, unpacking the underlying causes of the structural inequalities and oppressions that people experience in their daily lives. Which is where this type of learning differs from populist approaches. This is about learning for democratic social change in the pursuit of social justice agendas.

- **Recognition of different realities.** Most importantly, learning for active citizenship needs to take account of the differences in communities' contexts, priorities and needs. Participatory action research has a key role to play here, supporting individuals and groups to enable them to explore the nature of their problems and concerns, developing critical understandings of the most effective ways of tackling these issues, together.

This includes the importance of understanding differences **within** communities, including differences in terms of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, disability and faith. These need to be understood as well as the differences **between** communities and those who have the power to make a difference.

Without such critical understanding communities can become even more divided, with the loudest voices predominating, rather than communities focussing upon ways of building alliances to move forward, addressing their mutual concerns in solidarity.



- **Diversity as a value.** This involves respecting diversity, in terms of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, disability and faith, without exacerbating divisions between them. Community-based learning for active citizenship needs to support communities to build alliances for democratic social change, whilst recognising and respecting different interests and concerns..

Time is essential here. It takes time to build the mutual trust that is needed for communities to have the confidence to engage in challenging dialogues.



- **Learning needs skilled facilitation.** The importance of the facilitation process needs to be emphasised, in parallel. Skilled facilitation is essential if people are to engage in this type of learning and/ or to engage in participatory action research. And this in turn requires high level training and continuing support for those who provide learning for active citizenship, whether as paid professional workers or as unpaid volunteer activists.
- **Ethical implications.** These processes need to be taking account of ethical issues and questions of ethos. For example, these issues include the importance of ensuring that everyone listens to each other with mutual respect. Learning for active citizenship needs to take place in safe spaces, where people feel comfortable sharing their experiences and challenging each other with consideration, respecting every one's right to be heard and to have their confidences respected.



- **Sustainable partnerships.** Like learning for active citizenship, more generally, participatory action research needs to be built upon equitable and durable partnerships. Universities and communities can work together in mutually beneficial ways. But such partnerships need to be based upon shared understandings of the potential power differences involved – together with shared understandings about how to work towards more equitable relationships of collaboration and trust.

Such partnerships can provide the basis for building alliances for democratic social change and renewal, more widely. Learning for active citizenship needs to take place within the context of broader movements for democratic regeneration and social justice agendas. This manifesto is absolutely not suggesting that there are simple solutions, let alone suggesting that the growth of Far Right approaches can be combatted by community-based learning or participatory action research on their own. On the contrary. This is about promoting ways in which they can contribute to wider strategies, finding ways of moving forward in the context of our current challenges.

*If you would like to know more about the Take Part Network,
please visit our website:*

<http://www.takepart.org>

*And if you would be interested in getting involved,
please do contact us directly:*

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