

## Article: Is it ok to miss you? Reflections on the changing face of youth and community work.

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**In this reflective piece, Wayne Richards and Jo Lewis reflect on the feelings of loss and grief, as well as their hope for the future, brought about by the closure of the Youth and Community Work course at their university.**

This paper has taken a long time to write. We set out with the ambitious plans of putting a human face on the demise of youth and community work and professional training in the tradition heralded by the Albemarle report. We wanted to recognise the emotional impact of the loss at a personal level and to hold a space which celebrates youth and community work but at the same time marks its transition or possible passing. This is a reflective paper based on an ongoing dialogue between the two of us as we have positioned ourselves in the changing landscape over the past year. Our journey started when we were confronted with news of the closure of our course at Worcester University. This was not a surprise as the institutional stance regarding the viability of small courses had been transparent and, in the face of falling numbers, our Youth and Community course had been brought into the spotlight for the wrong reasons and its closure had been long anticipated. However, the presentation of this decision to us was abrupt and still a shock. Our initial response, along with the rest of the team, was to consider how we adapt and

survive. We contemplated rebranding, integrating courses and migrating the values and principles of youth and community work into new territories. In many ways this was the same message we were giving our students who, likewise, were exposed to the severe cuts in JNC youth and community worker posts driven by austerity policies. In doing so we realised that the personal experience of loss – of values, identity and purpose – was not being acknowledged beyond the economic rationalisms of austerity and viability.

This current situation seems remarkably similar to that observed in the Albemarle Report nearly sixty years ago.

The Youth Service is at present in a state of acute depression. All over the country and in every part of the Service there are devoted workers. And in some areas the inspiration of exceptional individuals or organisations, or the encouragement of local education authorities, have kept spirits unusually high. But in general we believe it true to say that those who work in the Service feel themselves neglected and held in small regard, both in educational circles and by public opinion generally. We have been told time and time again that the Youth Service is “dying on its feet” or “out on a limb”. (Ministry of Education, 1960)

However, given the current dominance of a neoliberal ideology which demands a return on investment, our sense was that we are in a changed economic and political climate – one that cannot reproduce youth and community work in the tradition inspired by the Albemarle report. Hence, we felt that we were not at the start of a new cycle, instead we needed to open ourselves to a real transformation of youth and community work, to something new within the emerging environment. This would mean letting go of it as we knew it and accepting its death. In this we were adopting Joseph Campbell’s observations that death is a critical phase in any transformative journey and a symbolic gateway to rebirth (Campbell, 1949). We presented a paper which delivered this message to the Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work (TAG/PALYCW) annual conference in 2017. This message of the demise of youth and community work is not new to the profession. In 2011, Jeffs wrote an article ‘Running Out of Options: Re-Modelling Youth Work’ where he made it abundantly clear that local authority funded youth work had reached a crisis point where, ‘the remnants

cannot be secured and much that lingers is not worth resuscitating even if that were possible' (Jefferies, 2011: 7). He raised the question of the validity of HE youth and community courses if the local authority funding stream of youth work no longer existed. He also called for an 'urgent focus' on what could replace the existing HE course (Jefferies, 2011: 7).

Muirhead's (2015) summary of Smith's overview of the current landscape, starkly outlined the impact of living within a neoliberal world. Smith (2001) saw the reliance on an economic model, which continually measures success against development and growth within the economy, would not create the conditions for increased spending within youth service provision either now or in the future. Smith (2001) also believed that the current British political oligarchy state, which ultimately gives more power to fewer people, will inevitably continue to seek outcomes for any investment in youth. Therefore ensuring that there remains a greater emphasis on target driven youth work. Finally, he recognised that the ecological crisis comprising of an increasing population coupled with unsustainable practices, is a worsening situation, which has yet to be successfully addressed. These three elements brought together have perhaps resulted in a perfect storm within which youth work, in its traditional form, plays no part?

Higher Education Institutes have been grappling with this question up and down the country. Resulting in course closures, the reconfiguration of existing courses or new developments and alliances. There are many positives to take from the creative approach to sustaining HE courses but it is important, no essential, to remember the human impact that the austerity and slow decline of the traditional youth service has had on lecturers, practitioners and students. In Joseph Campbell's narrative (1949), we are faced with the hero's dilemma of whether to hold on to cherished values and traditions which are possibly now obsolete or to let go and face the new environment renewed. Our shared dialogue over the past year has been a pendulum between these two positions; between loss and hope, between letting go and holding on.

The following two reflective pieces come from our dialogue, although they are not necessarily in dialogue. They represent two

complementary reactions to the same conditions which reflect the mixed emotions and swings between letting go and hanging on. Our reminiscences can make for sad and depressing reading or they can be liberating and inspire hope.

### Reflection 1: Holding Space

We have become used to iconic organisations closing down; Woolworths and BHS to name but two. Organisations that have been with us for decades, which have been part of the rich tapestry of our high streets. These organisations failed to avoid the changing landscape of the consumer preference and market developments. With news of their closure, I felt a strange sadness; a pang for my childhood wandering around Woolworths deciding on which sweets would weigh the least in the pick and mix section. But did I really feel a sense of loss of their closing? Did I consider the impact on fellow shoppers or staff who would have to seek other places of employment or new venues to feed their shopping experience?

On reflection, the honest answer is probably no, those feelings were fleeting but did not linger. The impact of these organisations closing was no more than a quick trip down memory lane, a brief indulgence in childhood memories and a recognition that it is not like it was in the good old days. The closing down happened to other people, to products and services, which had been replaced by the next generation of technology, marketing, and inventions.

However, enduring a slow and painful shrinkage of the youth and community profession as it suffered at the hands of severe and persistent austerity cuts over the last seven years (Youdell & McGimpsey 2014) has left me with a great sense of loss. A loss, which is difficult to articulate to the many when only a few truly understand what that loss represents. The term 'loss' usually describes losing something that is tangible; your wallet, car keys, a job or a loved one. It can be seen and understood by many, with little need to offer an explanation of how that loss has impacted on you.

The sense of loss experienced when the youth and community HE professional course, of which I was a member, was formally closed was incredibly difficult to articulate to colleagues both internally and externally to the Institute. The loss was not in terms of employment

as developing new courses are part of the hum of working within HE Institutes. The loss was felt more personally, an onslaught on the values and principles by which I work and live.

The guiding values and principles held by youth and community work are so deeply entrenched within the way in which I work that to suggest that the course was no longer needed or necessary was to say that there is very little value in building relationships with young people. How do you place a monetary value on developing a relationship, which is dialogical, mutually respectful and recognises the complexity of people's lives? A way of engaging with people that enables you to walk beside an individual whilst they navigate their complex landscape, offering support along the way. Working to their time-frame and ignoring external pressures by focusing on the here and now. For many in the profession this is the very essence of our work.

This has been a period of uncertainty and reflection, in which I have needed to create a reflective space where I could explore the myriad of feelings that were bombarding my senses. This reflective space has enabled me to recognise that values and principles are not lost or found but rather they can be buffeted about in this 'perfect storm' we find ourselves currently navigating. As this realisation has dawned on me there has been a strengthening in conviction that the compass by which our values and principles navigate us is set on the right course. It is holding onto these values and principles, which will play a pivotal role in securing the profession's long-term sustainable future.

Youth and community workers are, by our very nature, resilient people who are used to adapting to a volatile and unpredictable landscape. We are skilled in finding ways in which to survive these uncertainties and to work with what is in front of us, adapting to the challenges and seeking value in the relationship rather than focusing on the outcome. If we are to adapt to this changed landscape then we must find a way to develop a language, which is both recognisable, understood and valued far beyond the youth and community limitations.

Discussing the youth and community profession in terms of 'loss' may or may not resonate with some people within the sector. It may be

perceived for some, that if this is the terminology that I use to express how I am feeling then I have given up hope of continuing to engage in youth work or to work with young people ever again. This perception would not be correct in its analysis; grieving and loss is part of a necessary process that will enable new developments to emerge. It can be done individually but can be equally powerful if space is created for a collective process to take place.

Grieving helps to create the story of the legacy and to celebrate the positive impact that youth work has had both on young people and the well-being of society. Grieving is both necessary and cathartic. It helps those silenced voices to create sound again; it enables resilience to be built and re-connects people. It is not a negative process but one, which involves bravery, determination and a belief in the future.

Engaging with a reflective process both in dialogue and writing has been neither a selfish nor self-indulgent act. Viewing our experiences through a reflective lens has enabled us to recognise that there has been a loss both personally and professionally. It has established some clarity around the elements of the profession, which we need to preserve and those that we need to let go of. Taking stock of the situation and slowing down the urge to move quickly to secure what we already have has provided an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of how and why we need to adapt to this new landscape. Change is inevitable but how we react to this change is not.

## Reflection 2: Gift of an interval

Sixty Years ago ...

“The flow of recruits shrank,  
The number of full time leaders fell away  
And the university and other full-time courses  
Closed down one by one” \*

... And now again.

A cycle complete  
And a return to where we started

Perhaps?

Yet, the 'blood transfusion' of funding to youth services  
Engendered by the Albemarle Report  
Has provided a gift of an interval  
An inspiration of Informal Education  
With emancipatory goals  
Geared towards self-actualization  
Rather than having remedial or corrective intent.  
It has been a privilege to ride the wave of Albemarle

Now it is time to re-member  
I saw Craig for the first time in 25 years  
I did not recognise him at first  
Once a shy and gaunt young man  
Unemployed  
Now filled out – a man – with confidence  
I remember his eyes and his smile  
The connection restored  
Despite the passing of time  
Which has haemorrhaged away

I remember Lorna,  
A beautiful and witty young woman  
We wrote and produced a nativity play together  
Now head teacher at a PRU  
She chased me down to let me know I was one of her inspirations  
I forgot to tell her that she was also one of mine

I remember Wayne  
A curious and attention seeking young man  
He let off the handbrake on the mini bus  
On a hill at a campsite  
Nearly crashed it.  
I wonder what he is doing now.

I remember countless circuits of the ice rink  
At silver blades  
Me providing a stable prop  
for novices venturing out on new experiences

Holding and being held  
Perhaps a metaphor for youth work

Ronnie, John, Terri, Caroline .....

And generations of students  
Sent out to make a difference in the world  
I remember them all  
We grew up together  
A shared journey to an uncertain and unknowable future

Memories remain  
but etched away  
By the toxic march of neo liberalism  
Uncertainty of outcome  
Based on voluntary relationship  
In associational spaces  
And the value of human potential  
Now being replaced by that of human capital  
With a shift from autonomy to accountability  
From person centred responsiveness  
To cost effectiveness and return on investment  
And a commodification of youth?

Our course has been closed  
We saw it coming  
Falling numbers  
An inability to meet recruitment targets  
Its relevance to a disappearing profession  
The inevitable logic of viability  
Now euthanised  
Bringing a sense of relief  
No more apologies and false promises  
But confirmation of that dreaded sense of shame and failure

Now walking the embers of a lost tradition  
A strange disconnect  
And shame  
A dismembering  
A fragmented team  
A struggle for identity and purpose



A loss of place and belonging  
We need to acknowledge the loss  
And provide space to grieve

The ghost of Albemarle lingers  
Refusing to let go  
Its legacy  
An embodied sense of value  
Migrating into new territories  
Providing hope for the future

### Where now?

So where are we now? – in transition – caught between nostalgic rememberings and developing a future consciousness. Taking the time to look back and reflect on the situation has given us reassurance that youth and community work is a thing of value and worth preserving. It has, in many ways, strengthened our resolve to protect our own values and principles that have informed our work within this field. Facing an uncertain future has meant letting go of the past, whilst acknowledging that there is a growing need to diversify current youth work approaches within an informal educative ethos. We continue to advocate an approach, which is framed by a social, political and spiritual structure and set in a foundation of social justice. This framework is built on a bedrock of values and principles and continues to be relevant now and into the future. In the meantime, we are having to endure the stresses of the present situation we find ourselves in. We still cycle through the stages of loss and grieving similar to those identified by Kubler Ross (1969) with intermittent bouts of anger, bargaining and depression – perhaps still not ready for a final acceptance.

Change brings with it uncertainty but it can also bring hope and dare we say it, excitement about the possibilities of future youth and community delivery both in practice and Higher Education Institutes. There is a great deal of work to be done to ensure that youth and community work continues to transform into an adaptive model of working that is sustainable in this ever changing landscape. The way in which we need to develop and adapt will not always be clear but taking time to reflect, grieve, celebrate and remember is not wasted

energy but are necessary elements of gaining an insight into what could be.

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**Biography:**

Wayne Richards is a Lecturer in youth and community work. He has background experience as a youth and community worker and counsellor. He is an action researcher interested in transformative practice.

Jo Lewis is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Worcester delivering the Youth and Community Work BA (Hons) course. She spent 25 years in practice before entering teaching, with a special interest in learning disabilities.