Critical social engagement – or ‘something for the CV’?:

young people’s extra-curricular activities

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ABSTRACT

The government has argued, in various arenas, that ‘active citizenship’ is one way in which young people can be effectively re-engaged with their communities, and with the political process more broadly. As part of this analysis, it has placed particular emphasis on the potential contribution of youth volunteering. However, many researchers have argued that such initiatives are essentially conservative, placing emphasis, firstly, on the skills and competences necessary to make a contribution to the economy rather than more innovative understandings of citizenship and, secondly, on the importance of active community participation rather than an understanding of welfare rights and social citizenship. In engaging with this debate, this article draws on a study of 21 young people (aged between 16 and 18 years old) involved in a range of different voluntary, peer-driven and socially focused extra-curricular groups in sixth-form colleges. It argues that, for the young people involved in this study, the effects of becoming involved were complex, multidirectional and, in some cases, apparently contradictory. While in some ways the activities appeared to serve essentially conservative functions (for example, by developing sympathy for those in
positions of power), in other respects they engendered a much more critical stance to some aspects of the young people’s worlds.

BACKGROUND

Emergence of the ‘active citizen’

David Miller (2000) has argued that there are three understandings of ‘citizenship’ that are dominant in contemporary British society. The first is essentially a passive form of citizenship, based on a liberal model, which emphasises the set of rights and obligations that gives every citizen an equal status in the political community. The second understanding is of the citizen as consumer, empowered to seek redress if service is not satisfactory. Miller argues that although, in this second conceptualisation, the citizen assumes a more active role, both understandings are predicated upon an individualised model of the citizen. In contrast, the third understanding posits a more active and collective form of citizenship; here, the citizen is not only a rights-holder and claimant, but also someone who is actively involved in how their community functions. Despite Miller’s claims that this view is held by only a minority of the general public, it is this third understanding that has gained widespread currency amongst recent Labour and Conservative administrations – and which presently underpins a broad range of policy initiatives pursued, variously, by the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Cabinet Office and the Department for Education and Skills. Indeed, as Coffey (2004) notes, within the political project of the so-called third way, citizenship has assumed a key role, ‘recast as an active status that carries with it the obligations of social inclusion, mutuality, participation and democracy’ (p.43).

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Some commentators have argued that there are important distinctions between conceptualisation of this kind of ‘active citizen’ on the right and left of the political spectrum. For example, Deem et al. (1995) have suggested that those on the right promote civil society and active involvement in community groups as a means of releasing people from a welfare culture, while those on the left are more inclined to believe that community acts to provide the conditions for citizenship, and that citizenship is properly attained through political involvement. Strains of both these arguments can be seen in policy pronouncements from the Labour government from 1997 onwards. However, it has been claimed that Labour’s clear emphasis on the responsibilities of citizenship, as well as a citizen’s rights, has been part of a broader project to re-educate people that the state is an enabler rather than a provider of services (Landrum, 2002). Indeed, the Civic Renewal Unit, within the UK’s Department for Communities and Local Government, claims that civic renewal has three key ingredients: active citizens who contribute to the common good; strengthened communities in which people work together to find solutions to problems; and partnership in meeting public needs (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006).

Within this agenda for promoting active citizenship, education is assigned a key role. Not only are ‘active’ conceptualisations of citizenship embedded within the Crick Report (QCA, 1998) – which provided the basis for the programme of citizenship education for 11-16 year olds and became a compulsory part of the National Curriculum in 2002 – but they are also clearly articulated within the recommendations for post-16 citizenship education (FEFC, 2000) and in programmes of adult education. Indeed, the Active Citizenship Centre, which was launched in 2003 and
has now been subsumed under the ‘Together We Can’ agenda, developed a programme of ‘Active Learning for Active Citizenship’. This ran until March 2006 and comprised a series of regional groupings, testing approaches to citizenship education for adults. Nevertheless, while some of these initiatives are clearly aimed at adults, children and young people tend to be prioritised within both citizenship education and broader debates about the necessity of fostering active citizenship. This is a theme that is pursued in more depth below.

**Importance of ‘active citizenship’ among young people**

Within T.H. Marshall’s (1950) seminal account of the historical development of citizenship, children and young people were largely absent. Moreover, Hall *et al.* (1998) claim that, where they were included, they were treated as little more than ‘citizens-in-the-making’. While it is arguable that the role assigned to young people – as ‘developing citizens’ – has changed little over the half-century since Marshall’s text was published, current policy initiatives place young people centre-stage. Although it is likely that this focus is driven partially by a desire to inculcate messages about the *enabling* function of the state and the importance of assuming responsibility for oneself and one’s community within young people at an early stage in their lives, it is also driven by a widespread concern about young people’s alleged disengagement from the political process. Indeed, Lister (2005) claims that it is precisely because of their perceived lack of engagement in politics that young people are portrayed as deficient citizens.

The 1997 and 2001 general elections in the UK witnessed a downward trend in turnout, generally, but this was particularly marked amongst young people. In 2005,
although reported turnout increased amongst those aged between 35 and 44, 55 and 64 and over 64, it declined amongst the youngest age group (the 18-24s) and remained the same for the 25-34 age group. Thus, while the actual turnout increased from 59.4 per cent in 2001 to around 61.2 per cent in 2005, the reported turnout of the 18-24 age group fell from 49.4 per cent to 44.3 per cent over the same period of time (Phelps, 2005). Kimberlee (2002) provides a useful analysis of the competing explanations for this declining political participation. He distinguishes between explanations focused on: ‘youth’ (that claim that young people’s age is the reason for their apathy); ‘politics’ (that suggest that barriers to participation are created by the state, political parties and/or the nature of the public sphere); ‘alternative values’ (that young people are attracted to alternative political ideas that are outside the gambit of political parties); and ‘generation’. This last explanation is the one Kimberlee favours. He argues that changes to both the social circumstances of young people and their transitions into adulthood have direct implications for political engagement. This argument is taken up by a number of other researchers who have explored in some depth the experiences of young people across the UK. Thomson et al. (2004), for example, suggest that young people’s unwillingness to engage in political processes is inextricably linked to the fragmentation of transitions to adulthood and the consequential lack of meaning associated with institutional rites. Similarly, Hall and Williamson (1999) and Jones and Wallace (1992) contend that both political participation and self-identification as a citizen are affected by young people’s frequent failure to achieve economic independence by the age they reach legal majority:
There is an important distinction to be drawn between the legal aspects of adult citizenship and the broader sense of membership and belonging to which citizenship refers. As they enter upon adulthood and full citizenship status, many young people today find that their ‘lived’ experience of citizenship falls short of both its legal and normative promise. (Hall and Williamson, 1999, p.9-10.)

Over recent years, however, researchers within the disciplines of education, sociology and politics have contested the assumption that young people have become increasingly politically disengaged. Lash and Urry (1994) have suggested that, in contrast, young people are at the vanguard of new social movement and ‘lifestyle politics’, while O'Toole et al. (2003) have argued that non-participation in elections can, in some cases, be a conscious political act. Moreover, by employing a broader understanding of what constitutes political activity (including, for example, volunteering and campaigning), Roker et al. (1999), Skelton and Valentine (2003) and Lister (2005) have demonstrated that the majority of young people involved in their studies had achieved a high degree of political engagement.

In addition to arguments about political participation, it has also been claimed that the conditions of late modernity are antithetical to the assumption of identification as a citizen. Indeed, Coffey (2004) emphasises the negotiated nature of young people’s social identities. She goes on to contrast the way in which these identities are taken on, largely through interactions with peers and family members, with the ‘top down’ conferment of citizenship identity, which is usually not a matter of negotiation at all. Furthermore, other writers (e.g. Hall et al., 1998) have claimed that young people’s identities frequently stretch beyond national boundaries – through global youth
cultures, for example – such that national citizenship may appear an outdated and inflexible discourse.

Against this backdrop, ‘active citizenship’ has been argued to be one way in which young people can be effectively re-engaged with their communities – and with the political process more broadly. Education and voluntary work have been proposed as the main vehicles through which this is to be achieved (Lister, 2005).

**Achieving active citizenship through voluntary work and education**

An analysis of youth volunteering projects, conducted by Drake and Davis Smith (2004) has demonstrated the wide range of such projects that have been funded by the government over the past decade – including the Young Volunteer Development Programme, Millennium Volunteers and Young Volunteer Challenge. Although Ellis (2004) has argued that only a small minority of young people are actively involved with organisations that engage in the promotion of positive social change, national surveys have indicated that levels of volunteering amongst young people and older adults are broadly similar (Institute for Volunteering Research, 2004; Murphy *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, the 2005 Citizenship Survey, conducted by the Home Office, indicated that the 16-19 age group is more likely to engage in informal volunteering than older age groups (Murphy *et al.*, 2005). However, there are also clear differences between social groups: women are more likely to volunteer than men, and the white middle classes more than other groups (Institute for Volunteering Research, 2004).

The government is keen to promote youth volunteering further and, to this end, established the Russell Commission to develop a National Framework for Youth
Action and Engagement. This framework was published in March 2005 in conjunction with the announcement of a £100 million investment to recruit one million new volunteers. Indeed, the Commission aims to actively engage half of the 16-25 year old population in some form of volunteering, and ‘to make volunteering a common, fun and popular pursuit for young people…to help establish a pattern of lifelong engagement which would be of benefit to the individual, the local community and the UK as a whole’ (2005: 9). Underpinning this work is a clear notion of active citizenship, combining ‘communal values and social responsibilities with an ideological commitment to self-interest’ (Coffey, 2004: 55). Indeed, within the Framework document, alongside the hope that ‘Society as a whole will benefit as young people express themselves as active citizens’ (Russell Commission, 2005: 6), is a long list of the ways in which individuals will benefit from getting involved – through going to new places, making new friends, learning new skills and ‘helping themselves to better jobs’ (ibid.). As noted above, active citizenship also constitutes a central element of the citizenship education programme, which became a compulsory part of the National Curriculum in English schools in 2002. The final report of the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship (QCA, 1998) was explicit in its support for active citizenship – and defined education for citizenship as combining political literacy, social and moral responsibility and community involvement. The same priorities have also driven the developments in post-16 citizenship education (Hall et al., 1998).

Although some commentators have highlighted the potential of citizenship education to offer young people a radical critique of society (for example, Lees, 2000, Aapola et al., 2005), critics have pointed out a number of important limitations in the way that
citizenship education is currently conceptualised, many of which apply equally to the
government’s emphasis on youth volunteering within educational institutions. Firstly,
the tension between the role of the school or college in confirming the social, cultural
and political order of the nation state (achieved through regulating the way in which
students prepare to take their place as future adults) and its role in ensuring social
justice, social mobility and the emancipation of groups and individuals has been
highlighted (Gordon et al., 2000). This theme is taken up by Coffey (2004) who
argues that current practice masks ‘a contradiction in the discourses of citizenship –
whereby citizenship can be perceived as part of a system of social control, or as a
recognition of rights and social inclusion’ (p.56). She argues that, as part of this,
education for citizenship reflects an agenda that focuses on the skills and
competencies necessary to make an active contribution to the economy and the
realignment of concepts of social and moral understanding, rather than more
innovative and democratic understandings of citizenship.

Secondly, it has been argued that the emphasis on community involvement – apparent
in citizenship education as well as the promotion of youth volunteering – may
undermine a Marshallian form of social citizenship in favour of voluntarism. Indeed,
Hall and Williamson (1999) and Garmarnikow and Green (2000) assert that the
current emphasis on active citizenship tends to construct the non-participation of
young people as ‘deficits of knowledge and understanding rather than as engendered
by institutional inadequacies’ (Garmarnikow and Green, 2000: 106). Moreover, they
go on to claim that social citizenship as a site for welfare rights, as conceived by
Marshall, has disappeared, its place now occupied by the duties of volunteering and
community involvement. Ahier et al. (2003) contend that this kind of shift may be
exacerbated by teachers’ sensitivities about teaching controversial issues. Indeed, they suggest that this may have brought about forms of relatively ‘depoliticised’ citizenship education, implicitly reinforcing a politics which prioritises ‘community’ and the importance of individual contributions in building certain kinds of social capital over arguments about the role of the state in relation to social citizenship and citizenship entitlements.

To some extent these concerns have been borne out in evidence about changes in young people’s understandings of citizenship. The young people in Lister’s (2005) research, for example, found it more difficult to identify their rights than their responsibilities, with the most frequently mentioned responsibility being ‘being constructive’ and this included ‘giving back to the community’. Furthermore, Lister notes that over the three years of her research, understandings of citizenship which were predicated upon economic respectability and social participation became more common, while those that stressed universal status, people’s right to a voice and a social contract became increasingly less common.

What is less clear, however, is the extent to which young people’s voluntary activities have affected their view of society and sense of social citizenship. While there is now a growing body of work on the impact of citizenship education in schools and colleges (for example, Kerr et al., 2004 and Faulks, 2006), we still know relatively little about the impact of young people’s extra-curricular and peer-driven activities. Thus, claims about the essentially conservative or regressive nature of much volunteering work, discussed above, remain untested. In an attempt to redress this
gap, the remainder of this paper draws on the experiences of 21 young people who were members of five socially-focused, extra-curricular groups.

METHODS: RESEARCHING THE MIDDLE CLASSES

During the 2003-04 academic year, case studies were conducted of five voluntary, community-focused groups, run within sixth-form colleges. These were chosen after an initial mailing to six schools and colleges, asking for permission to speak to any relevant groups and discussions with the young people involved in the various groups, explaining the purpose of the research and the methods that would be used. I conducted observations of four of the five groups over the course of the year and, towards the end of this period, interviewed the 21 students who had been involved in the various groups (see Table 1 below for a more detailed breakdown). In addition, I interviewed the members of staff who led the three staff-run groups. All the interviews were semi-structured and typically covered the reasons why the young people had got involved with the groups, their experiences of the activities, and any impact they felt they had had on different parts of their lives (for example, their academic studies, relationships with others and engagement with social and political issues). The research aims, the wider literature and analytic notes taken immediately after each interview were used to develop a thematic framework. This was then used methodically to code the interview data – using ‘N6’, a software package for analysing qualitative data. On the basis of this coded material, patterns across the data were identified and tentative theories and explanations developed.
In assessing the extent to which the claims in this paper are generalisable, it is important to be clear about the characteristics of the individuals and the educational institutions involved in the project. The four colleges are all high-attaining sixth form colleges with a strong academic ethos; the vast majority of students in all of the institutions go on to higher education and many secure places in high status universities. All four colleges draw students from relatively prosperous areas, and serve predominantly middle class communities.

The age of the respondents (16-18 years of age) and their class location (in almost all cases, from the middle class in relatively affluent areas) may both have significant bearing on the kind of responses that were forthcoming. For example, in relation to age, the Institute for Volunteering Research (2004) has demonstrated that, amongst its sample of young people, there was considerable variation in reasons given for volunteering, by respondents’ age. Those between 14 and 16 years of age tended to place greater emphasis on societal benefits than the 17-plus age group, who were more likely to be motivated by the personal rewards volunteering was thought to offer. The claims made in this paper should be viewed in this light.

Similarly, the generally privileged nature of this sample should be recognised. The young people who took part in this project are clearly positioned differently from those involved in France’s (1998) research, which was conducted in relatively deprived areas. France explains the low level of voluntary activity that he found amongst his respondents by arguing that they felt excluded by their local community and thus had developed no sense of responsibility towards it or any need to conform to the norms of that particular society. Furthermore, as many of his respondents...
believed that, for them, the only route out of poverty was to leave their local area, they had little motivation or desire to take action within it. Nevertheless, the focus of this paper – on the actions and beliefs of the relatively privileged – is important in its own right. Indeed, Gamarnikow and Green (2000) argue that the current emphasis on bringing about social change through developing social capital (through community volunteering, for example) absolves the state from responsibility, placing it instead on the socially well-placed. Thus, while the sample is small and not socially representative, it does facilitate some exploration of the extent to which youth volunteering is able to promote social change amongst the ‘socially well-placed’.

The class composition of the sample also facilitates engagement with current debates about middle class strategies to maintain advantage within an expanding higher education system. Stephen Ball and colleagues (Ball, 2003; Reay et al., 2005) have argued that, with a mass system of HE and stagnant, if not contracting, social mobility, a degree is no longer an automatic ticket to high status, professional employment. Ball contends that, as a consequence, middle class families are attempting to monopolize particular educational sites (such as high status universities) to prevent generational decline. Although, as I have argued elsewhere (Brooks, 2004, 2005), there are important cleavages within the middle class and clear differences in inclination and capacity to exploit the education market to one’s advantage, there is also strong evidence that young people are increasingly being expected to supplement their educational credentials with other forms of distinction in order to compete for the most prestigious university places and, later, for high status graduate jobs (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Brooks, 2006a). The focus on the middle classes within this paper
helps to explore whether socially-focused volunteering has a place to play within such strategies to secure distinction.

[Insert Table 1]

**ENDORSING THE STATUS QUO**

From the students’ narratives, the interviews with staff and the observations of some of the groups, it emerged that, in several important respects, the extra-curricular activities were indeed exerting a conservative influence on many of the participants.

**Greater acceptance of some aspects of society**

Firstly, some students appeared to have become more accepting of some aspects of society as a result of realising the difficulty of bringing about change. This was particularly evident amongst young people in the students’ union, but was also mentioned by some members of the Amnesty International groups.

Members of the students’ union and one of the Amnesty groups described how their experience of working within the community had made them less optimistic about the possibility of effecting change. Indeed, the teacher who oversaw the students’ union group, summed up the responses of many of the group members when she claimed that: ‘It involves a lot of growing up for them because you see them at the beginning, quite idealistic and really critical of how things are run and then they slowly begin to see how difficult it is to change things.’ Similarly, Maria (a pseudonym), who was part of a peer-led Amnesty International group believed that the bureaucratic
arrangements within the organisation limited what she and her fellow students were able to achieve, while Rob (a member of the students union) noted:

It’s shown me that there’s a lot of bureaucracy in something like this. You can’t just make a decision; you have to do it in the right way and talk to the right people…when it’s hard to get something done for us it shows it’s even harder for big organisations to do it as well.

Relatedly, some students (again, particularly those in the students union) claimed that they had become more sympathetic to politicians as a result of their extra-curricular activities. Indeed, this was mentioned by almost all members of the students’ union:

It’s made me realise that it’s harder than you realise to do something like run the country. (Lisa, Students Union)

I would say I probably have a lot more respect for politicians now because – I know my job’s a lot easier compared to what they’re used to – but having people rely on you and have the responsibility of representing over 2000 people is quite a responsibility….so it does give you more respect for the people who have to do it as their job. (Steve, Students Union)

You can understand the problems that political leaders face and at the same time community leaders as well because they have to take the concerns of so many people which you don’t understand when you’re the individual looking
out for your own benefit of just your immediate friends or family. (Justin, Students Union)

For these young people, their experience of particular forms of community involvement had heightened their awareness of some of the limitations to ‘active citizenship’ and effecting social change. Contrasts can be drawn here with the findings of some other studies on young people’s participation within educational establishments. For example, Wyness et al. (2004) argue that concessions made to young people’s voices (such as in schools and colleges) are frequently perceived as patronising and devoid of any real substance. They contend that, as a consequence, young people’s perceptions of politics reflect the view that their collective interests are marginalised and their social status is inferior. However, in this study, despite having relatively little power within the broader college community, the students who were involved in the research showed no signs of feeling marginalised. Instead, they drew close analogies between student activities and those engaged in by older adults, and assumed that change was equally hard to effect at all levels of society.

**The importance of self-interest**

Secondly, it seemed that some young people were motivated to take part in such activities – partially, at least – by a desire to ‘play the game’ and provide evidence of a ‘rounded self’ when applying for university. This was evident in most of the groups but was particularly notable amongst members of the students’ union. Many of the interviewees spoke about the importance of the extra-curricular activities they had chosen for their CV or the personal statement for their UCAS form. Indeed, this kind
of motivation was, for many of the respondents, of equal (or greater) importance to
more altruistic ones:

I think every person you ask… I think they’d be lying if they didn’t say they
came on to the students’ union for their CV. I don’t know if they have. I think
they might be talking out of their backsides if they said they just came on the
SU to help students, as great as that sounds and as much as I would like to say
that’s why I went on, it was to a certain extent but the CV is what jobs and
universities want. You have to look after number one I suppose. (James,
Student Union)

For me it’s all about my UCAS form. I wanted to have something to talk about
at interview and that would just make me seem more interesting on paper….I
read a book about applying to Oxford just before coming here [to college] and
that’s my goal so I want to do everything I can to achieve it. (Maya, Peer
Support Group)

In Colleges 1 and 2 this belief had been reinforced by the messages they had received
from their teachers. Several students claimed that their form tutors had emphasised
the importance of taking part in extra-curricular activities to enable them to
demonstrate a ‘wide range of interests’ on their UCAS forms. Participation in such
activities was also driven by other factors, which were also quite removed from a
sense of personal and social responsibility. These included a desire to: make new
friends; develop new skills; and exercise some power within the college community.
Again, there were important differences by group type: those in the students’ union
appeared to be more strongly driven by the ‘CV factor’ than members of other groups; indeed, one member of an Amnesty International group was not sure whether membership of this group would be seen favourably by universities and potential employers.

Seen in this light, the extra-curricular activities discussed in this paper may offer some support to Ahier et al.’s (2003) contention that citizenship education and related activities ‘might be little more than a convenient way of adding a social gloss to an educational system which, in many ways, was increasingly devoted to individual instrumentalism’ (p.157). Moreover, there are certain parallels between the concern for one’s own individual academic (and economic) success evident in the quotations above, and the centrality of such notions to certain formulations of the government’s own understanding of citizenship. As Aapola et al. (2005) note:

Standard Western political, civil and social rights have been radically reconceptualised around this requirement [for economic independence], so that the individual’s responsibility to support themselves must come before the state’s duty of care to them. (p.176)

In many ways, some of the young people whose participation in these groups appeared to be motivated by these largely instrumental concerns, demonstrated characteristics similar to those of the ‘Players’ in Brown and Hesketh’s (2004) study of graduate recruitment practices. ‘Players’ understood employability as a positional game and typically took steps ‘to market themselves in ways that conformed to the requirements of employers in order to win a competitive advantage’ (p.9). This
frequently included such practices as using social contacts to find out what employers were looking for, reading books on how to answer difficult interview questions and attending workshops that simulated group exercises at assessment centres. In contrast, their ‘Purist’ counterparts viewed graduate recruitment as a meritocratic race, in which their aim was to find employment that offered the right ‘fit’ with their skills and qualifications.

**Institutionally-imposed limits**

Finally, it would appear that there are also institutionally-imposed limits on the extent to which groups are able to develop a critical analysis of society. For example, the member of staff responsible for co-ordinating the extra-curricular activities in College 1 explained how she would have to run ideas for new extra-curricular activities past the college principal ‘in case things are a bit too political’. Similar evidence is highlighted by Gordon *et al.* (2000) in their analysis of the ‘official school’ (for example: the written curriculum, formal hierarchies, pedagogic relations and disciplinary mechanisms) and its ‘informal’ counterpart (including interactions which are not part of the formal agenda, and the informal activities of students). In the British schools in their sample, attempts were made to integrate the two; time was made for informal activities but these could be subjected to official guidance and control. Indeed, Gordon and colleagues note that while students ‘made inroads into the official school…teachers and other staff, through their activities, made inroads into the informal school’ (p.195).

**PROMOTING A CRITICAL APPROACH**
The evidence so far has suggested that participating in these extra-curricular groups was associated with an increasing acceptance of the status quo. However, further analysis of the young people’s narratives indicated that, in other respects, many of the groups fostered a considerably more critical approach. Indeed, the evidence presented below suggests that, through their extra-curricular pursuits, many of the young people came to adopt a more questioning approach to: the formal curriculum, a range of substantive political issues, media representation of social issues and, what many perceived to be, the individualistic nature of society in the 21st century.

**The formal curriculum**

At the most local level, this more critical approach was evident in their attitudes towards the subjects that they were studying at college. For example, Luke described how the understanding he had gained through Amnesty International campaigns had led him to question the positive interpretation of globalisation presented by his geography teacher and similar assumptions that were evident within the textbook the class used. Paula also explained how her involvement in the peer support group had led her to be more critical of how she was being taught psychology: she believed that it focused exclusively on clinical aspects, rarely considering the wider (sociological) aspects of the topics they covered.

Several students had also developed a more critical attitude to the *methods* of teaching and learning in their A Level subjects. Some contrasted the more formal, didactic style of their timetabled lessons with the emphasis on independent research and peer-led learning that they had experienced in their extra-curricular activities.
I think a lot of the A Level teaching is just to get you through the exam. They teach for that…it doesn’t actually help you learn anything, I don’t think. [In the peer support group] it’s very much more of a group thing, and we’ve learnt from each other as much as anything else. (Emma, Peer Support Group)

Being on the SU is more learning for life, whereas biology, chemistry – being taught is really just learning how to skip through your exams. (James, Students Union)

I expected it [peer support group] to be more like lessons…but it’s actually much better this way, I think. It gets your interest more. It’s because you’re more active in it and you can actually get an understanding a bit better. (John, Peer Support Group)

**Political issues**

More common, however, was a belief that these particular kinds of extra-curricular activities had promoted a more critical stance towards political issues. Here, there were clear differences by type of activity. Most of those who believed that their attitudes had changed were from the Amnesty groups and the Right Group. For example:

It’s made me think more about how we also have to be careful though, not to impose the western culture on them [people in other countries]…I mean although there are obviously breaking human rights in some countries, you have to be careful not to go in and say what we think is right and what you
think is wrong….And I think you’re seeing that more and more now, like over
in Iraq and anything like that. (Rebecca, Amnesty Group)

It’s made me aware of abuses of women’s rights even in UK; I now think
about death penalty rather than just accept it; I’m aware of the role of the UK
in arms trade; and I think differently about anti-terror laws. (Janet, Amnesty
Group)

Young people in all five of the groups described how their involvement had also had
some impact on their political engagement, although this was much less common in
the peer support group than in the other four. Respondents’ views had been affected
on two levels. Firstly, many believed that their knowledge of political issues and
political processes (both broadly defined) had increased as a result of their extra-
curricular activities. These included: a greater awareness of political systems and
political issues in the UK and in other parts of the world (for example, international
trading systems, and the construction of teenage pregnancy as a social problem); and a
greater understanding of the political process in the UK – through analogy with
student representation. Secondly, several described how their attitudes to political
issues, political processes and their own political engagement had been affected by
their involvement in the extra-curricular groups. These included: a realisation that
politics is not boring; an increased confidence about discussing political issues with
others; and, in some cases, a belief that political change can be effected by taking
action.
It has been widely argued that young people’s growing involvement in single-issue pressure groups and ‘identity politics’ more broadly has been at the cost of their participation in conventional politics. Kimberlee (2002), for example, maintains that ‘The failure of young people to vote in general elections is seen…as resulting from [their] abandonment of traditional political activity and their greater interest in a new alternative politics with a different agenda’ (p.93). However, in the case of some of the young people involved in this research project, the opposite seemed true; for a significant minority, involvement in socially-focused extra-curricular groups appeared to have a positive impact on their willingness to engage with mainstream political processes.

**Media representations of social issues**

Students from all groups claimed that their extra-curricular activities had caused them to adopt a more questioning and critical stance to what they read in newspapers and common constructions of ‘social problems’. Paula described how the peer support group had affected her attitude to newspaper stories about social issues and made her more critical of the ‘moral panic’ around teenage pregnancy, for example. Danny, also in the peer support group, explained that his experiences in the group had caused him to become much more critical of media representations of all teenagers as ‘problems’. Members of the three Amnesty groups talked about how they had adopted more critical stances towards social policies in relation to two main issues: trade and asylum seekers. Lily’s comments are typical:

> Asylum seekers …it’s obviously in the newspapers the whole time, especially over the past year, and I think the impression you get, not necessarily from the
tabloids but generally, is that its always a negative thing and I think going to Amnesty has made me realise how positive an affect they can have and how they’re not necessarily economic migrants, they are actually needing to get away from something.

Similarly, Maya, from the peer support group described how she had become more concerned about racism and prejudice as a result of learning about the effect on people, while Paula claimed that the group had made her more accepting of difference.

**Individualistic nature of contemporary society**

For several young people, participation in extra-curricular groups of this kind had led them to question the individualistic nature of both the education system and wider society. For example, almost all the members of the students’ union described how, over the year, they had come to believe that group decisions were generally much better than individual ones and that reaching a consensus as a group provided a considerably firmer foundation for action. Young people from other groups also spoke about the benefits they believed accrued from working collaboratively. These included: learning from the diverse views of group members; feeling more secure in one’s own views if they were endorsed by others; being able to achieve greater change working together than would be possible on one’s own; and feeling more motivated to take action. The quotations below are typical:

It’s taught me that group decisions are always better than individual decisions.

(Rob, Students Union)
You just get…many more ideas start, because more people contribute…you see more results. You achieve more as a group. (Rebecca, Amnesty Group)

Aapola and colleagues (2005) argue, on the basis of their analysis of curriculum materials in different countries, that citizenship education seems to be reflecting broader social concerns for individualization and differentiation. However, the evidence from this project suggests that these extra-curricular activities, at least, were prompting participants to question some of the individualistic assumptions that they came to see as inherent in much of wider society. Indeed, their narratives seemed closer to those reported by Ahier et al. (2003) in their study of understandings of citizenship among higher education students. They note that their respondents ‘spoke a language of what we termed “mutuality”, which involved reciprocity in their relations with one another and a consciousness of fairness and justice’ (p.159) and suggest that this was developed through working with peers from different backgrounds. While many of the young people in the current project shared a very similar socio-economic background, it appeared that their extra-curricular activities encouraged them to work collaboratively in ways that many of them had not experienced before.

CONCLUSION

This paper addresses questions about the efficacy of volunteering as a means of educating for active citizenship. In developing a sustained critique of the relationship between volunteering and active citizenship, Hall et al. (1998) argue that while there
is merit in gaining practical experience of community involvement through socially useful projects, there is also considerable ambiguity as to what ‘active’ means in this context. They go on to assert that what must be avoided is a situation in which young people participate in socially-focused projects within their communities, but fail to engage fully with the concept of citizenship. By this they mean that they deem individual altruism and good neighbourliness to be insufficient; indeed, ‘where such schemes do not entail a recognition that the issues addressed are the product of relations that are themselves subject to question, they can fail to enhance an appreciation of citizenship’ (p.312).

The data presented above suggests that, in some ways, the four different types of voluntary, extra-curricular activity explored in this research did promote a critical approach to society. Respondents reported that they had become more questioning about the content of the formal curriculum in their colleges, as well as about more obviously political issues. Moreover, several presented quite sophisticated accounts of how they had become more critical of media representations of particular social issues. Perhaps most importantly, students from all groups believed that their volunteering had led them to question some of their previous individualistic assumptions – primarily through coming to appreciate the benefits of what they perceived to be genuinely collaborative group work. However, as the earlier part of the paper suggested, this is only a partial picture. In other ways these extra-curricular activities served essentially conservative functions: increasing the young people’s pessimism about the possibility of effecting social change; promoting individual, instrumental causes; and, in the case of the student union members, engendering considerable sympathy for politicians. This apparent conservatism should, however,
be viewed in the context of increasing competition for places at high status universities and on prestigious courses, and the widely documented struggle for ‘distinction’ on the part of the upper middle classes (Ball, 2003; Reay et al., 2005). It is perhaps unsurprising that the young people involved in this study were so concerned to boost their CV and gather useful material for their UCAS personal statement given: the increasing competitiveness of the education system (Lesko, 2001); the perceived need to supplement educational qualifications with relevant experiences (Brown and Hesketh, 2004); and the increasingly stratified higher education system (Brooks, 2006b).

This complex picture of conflicting priorities and effects has much in common with Thomson et al.’s (2002) analysis of young people’s discussions of adulthood. They argue that, amongst their respondents two dominant, yet competing, themes emerged. The first of these was relational; here, emphasis was placed on taking responsibility for others. The second theme was individualized, and was associated with increasing choice and autonomy. Just as Thomson et al. maintain that young people can move in and out of these discursive positions with ease, so it appeared that those involved in this study were able to talk about both their increasingly critical engagement with society in some respects, and their sympathy for those in positions of power. Similarly, they were able to be quite frank about their own self-interest in taking up voluntary activities, while recognising the benefits of working collaboratively with others for the collective good. Potential tensions in these positions were not highlighted by any of the young people during the interviews. Thus, while these activities do not seem to be promoting a conservative agenda – one which privileges notions of responsibility, without addressing broader structural questions – it appears
that the influence is complex, multi-directional and perhaps, in some cases, contradictory. Exploring such tensions may perhaps be a fruitful focus for young people themselves as part of a post-16 citizenship education programme.

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i The ‘Together We Can’ Action Plan, published by the government in 2005, sets out its strategy to enable people to engage with public bodies and influence decision-making.

ii Three are located in the south east of England and one in Wales.

iii Pseudonyms have been used for all the young people quoted in this article.