



Testing

An oddity of the past decade is that millions of adults have actually lost rather than gained the opportunity to engage in lifelong learning. The destruction of what Jack Straw in 1991 called 'one of the finest adult education services in the world' has not been a conscious aim of New Labour. But it has occurred as a direct result of priorities established and decisions taken in the name of a 'lifelong learning' strategy. While the funding for basic skills and for work-related learning has been vastly increased, the small public subsidy that for half a century maintained general adult education provision nationwide has either been removed altogether or severely cut back and constrained.

In the part of Somerset where I live, locally provided programmes of day and evening classes have virtually disappeared. Quality provision is only available for a few fortunate minorities, namely the academically weak (basic skills), the academically strong (Open University), trade union members in large workplace organisations, and the very wealthy (full cost leisure courses). For the general population, 90 per cent of the courses available 15 years ago have disappeared. Elderly citizens have lost practically all the daytime provision that was on offer in the local college. Young adults have lost the opportunity to retake GCSE or A-level subjects on one day or one evening a week. All local adults have lost out on leisure

and personal development learning opportunities that used to exist in abundance. Recent evidence suggests that this state of affairs is being replicated up and down the country. Learning and Skills Council statistics in February 2007 showed that a million fewer adults were attending classes in further and community education settings than two years earlier. A NIACE survey in June 2007 reported that half a million fewer adults were learning modern foreign languages than in 1999. Do such losses matter?

In the past, battles to 'save adult education' have had to be fought because misguided politicians have wrongly believed that they could cut the small amounts of



times

The assumption among policy makers that everything worth funding can be measured has put the future of general adult education in serious doubt, says **ALLEN PARROTT**

taxpayers' money that was spent on subsidising programmes of general adult education without causing pain or outcry. But this time the Women's Institute has not led one of its successful campaigns to restore the lost adult education provision. Perhaps the rhetoric of lifelong learning over the past 10 years – from the Kennedy and Dearing Reports to the Foster and Leitch Reports – has managed to convince the public and the media (and the education profession?) that the Government's narrow interpretation of lifelong learning as skills training does indeed represent the only valid call on the public purse. But are economic competitiveness and 'up-skilling' the right priorities for a twenty-first century education

system? Even if they are, should they be the *only* priorities?

At their best, mainstream adult education programmes offered a model of civic and democratic values that was not, and is not, available elsewhere in our consumerist and individualistic society. These values remain relevant because they relate to the general wellbeing of local communities as well as to possibilities for individual and personal development. They are in tune with the fashionable new agenda of 'happiness' as a social purpose, as well as with the more familiar (and increasingly urgent) 'green' agenda of sustainability. In addition, and somewhat ironically, the popular programmes of general adult education used

to provide a good example of market forces at work. Day and evening classes were only able to run when sufficient fee-paying learners could be attracted to them. Adult learners had real choices, and the 'product' was refreshed and updated each year in the form of new classes. This provision was, therefore, truly 'demand-led', even when courses had been initiated by professional providers or by an enthusiastic teacher. By contrast, the 2007 vocabulary of 'choice' and 'demand-led' is crudely Orwellian: it appears to mean that learners will be able to choose – and employers to demand – just one kind of learning: that which government thinks will be most beneficial for the economy.

A brief list may serve to remind *Adults*

Learning readers of some of the benefits and educational values that lay behind a more comprehensive and generous approach to adult learning:

- All students regarded as *equal* – to each other and the teacher;
- Rich and poor learners in the same classes – *social cohesion*;
- *Second chances* of all sorts, offered to people regarded as school ‘failures’;
- *Physical and mental health* of students and the population enhanced;
- An *escape* from the drudgery and predictability of everyday life;
- *Safe* evening activities, especially for women and single people;
- ‘*Non-affiliated*’ activities without any pressure placed on non-joiners;
- *Social and convivial* meeting places, as well as venues for learning;
- *Intrinsic worth* of subjects, entering one of the ‘conversations of humanity’;
- Intellectual *risk-taking*, leading to new ways of thinking and acting;
- Outlet and opportunity for developing *creativity and imagination*;
- *Confidence building* and personal development of all kinds;
- Opportunities to *deepen political understanding* and to ask ‘why’ questions;
- Facilitating *participation* in local organisations and/or in local issues.

It must be admitted straight away this list expresses the aspirations of the adult and community education profession as much as it describes the lived realities of adult learners. There was never a golden age in which all groups and every individual learner attending day and evening classes could be guaranteed to receive a high-quality educational experience. Some adult education was more amateurish than it should have been, and less concerned with quality than it would have been in an ideal – and a better-funded – world. On the other hand, millions of people did have learning experiences that enriched their lives as a result of this provision. And it did exemplify some of the best features of British society, like tolerance, respect for others and community involvement. Up and down the country, for half a century, there existed a critical mass of visionary chief education officers, supportive inspectors, enlightened heads of educational institutions and creatively dynamic professional adult education organisers who were able to ensure that the very small budgets devoted nationally and locally to the education of adults did indeed make a real difference to the individual lives of many people and to the civil lives of their communities.

At the very least, such a list should indicate that something valuable may have been lost in the past few years, not just for the millions who no longer attend but also for society as a whole. It also suggests that there may be some important educational values that do not deserve to be consigned to history. What precisely is being lost year on year will

necessarily be a matter of contention. This list gives equal weight to themes of liberal education, social justice, political participation and personal development, none of which is uncontroversial. However, in the current political context it would seem indulgent to rehearse or re-visit internal debates between pragmatists and visionaries about the true or proper purposes of adult education.

What needs to be addressed is the attack on education itself, on the concept as well as on the practice. The very word ‘education’ is disappearing. Gert Biesta argued recently in *Adults Learning* (Volume 18, Number 8) that the concept of ‘learning’, which is now used more widely than ‘education’ in political and professional circles, will always fail to capture some dimensions of the complex ways in which human beings interact with the world. He argued that there is a need ‘to reclaim – and perhaps even re-invent – a language for education’. But the world would seem to be moving in the opposite direction. Gordon Brown saw no problem in dropping the word ‘education’ from his ministers’ titles and from their new ministries and, amazingly, there seems to have been a general acceptance and even approval of this decision. This suggests that throughout the further and adult education professions, not just in political gatherings, everyone is so focused on skills and competitiveness that no-one wants to think about any other, more ‘educational’ purposes for the post-school sector. The task of trying to reinstate the concept of education as a fit and important topic for a public conversation is not going to be easy if it is not taken up by practitioners themselves.

Double whammy

The policy priorities of politicians (and of their advisers) over the past 10 years have been the trigger for the decline in general adult education. But underlying and shaping the policies is a deeper and less immediately obvious cause: adult education has been the victim of the ultra-mechanistic, technical-rational way of thinking that became both fashionable and feasible with the advent of cheap computer technology after 1980. Even in its hey-day general adult education lacked serious political clout. From the mid-1980s, it was being expected to ‘prove’ its benefits. The double whammy of indifferent and sceptical politicians, who had never really ‘got’ adult education, and a new breed of managers demanding an ‘evidence base’ of factual, quantitative information about outcomes and ‘added value’, has proved too much for a service that had always been insecure.

From a historical perspective maybe adult educators should be grateful that general adult education survived as long as it did. On the whole, adult education in Britain achieved its successes in the second half of the twentieth century despite the nation’s elected representatives rather than because of them. The small budgets for adult education were usually hidden from political view by the civil service – under the rubric of ‘other further education’ (OFE) – and on occasions

this may actually have saved the service from earlier dismemberment. If further education colleges were the Cinderella of the post-war education system, mainstream adult education was her good friend Buttons – a highly popular character with the audience, but one regarded as dispensable and not at all crucial to the plot by producers and theatre managers. With some honourable exceptions, like Winston Churchill and Jenny Lee, senior politicians and the majority of MPs were usually slow to support any adult education initiative. Even such an obviously good idea as the Open University was fortunate to get off the ground when it did. British politicians were much slower than their international counterparts to appreciate that changing patterns of working life would require a new emphasis on adult learning. Most developed countries had accepted the necessity for a lifelong learning strategy 20 years or more before David Blunkett announced the British version with such fanfare in the late 1990s.

Local politicians were no better, and often much worse, than their national counterparts. They would regularly find ideological reasons, as well as cost-cutting motives, to denigrate any adult educational activity which was not part of higher education, not related to work and not concerned with basic language and number skills. Some on the left saw all such adult classes as intrinsically and irredeemably middle class and part of the capitalist conspiracy to hold down the working classes and distract them from political action. A councillor in a Tory shire once proposed raising the fees for Sociology A-level, because ‘Sociology is no use to man nor beast and is, in any case, part of a left-wing conspiracy that wants to destroy the country’. At the same meeting, a colleague of this speaker argued that his wife’s painting and drawing course should be re-classified as a ‘vocational’ course – and therefore made cheaper – on the grounds that ‘she has begun to sell her pictures’. What is no longer amusing about this story is that 30 years later, 10 years after lifelong learning was belatedly proclaimed as government policy, many adults in Britain will now be unable to find either Sociology A-level or painting and drawing on offer in their local area.

Even if the national and the local political contexts had been more benign and supportive of general adult education, it might still have been difficult to ‘prove’ its value to the satisfaction of a sceptical outsider. Meaningful learning is deeply personal and its nature is frequently difficult to express in words, let alone in numerical form. Transformative educational experiences can be challenging, even life-changing, in ways that were unforeseen by either the learner or the teacher. What gets learned may be very different from what was originally intended. From the mid-1980s onwards none of this complexity counted for anything. The new managers wanted numbers and facts. It became a matter of faith that nothing should be allowed to escape measurement. Indeed, it is arguable



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that the single most influential belief system of the past 30 years is enshrined in the motto of the successful American management consultancy organisation, McKinsey: 'Everything can be measured and what gets measured gets managed'.

For more than 20 years, all public service professions in Britain have become extremely familiar, directly or indirectly, with this premise and its self-serving corollary. Within education, the planning and target culture, the league tables, the various attempts to micro-manage the school curriculum, the excessive testing and box-ticking for learners of all ages, and the equation of adult learning with skills acquisition, all to some extent stem from this slogan. The McKinsey orthodoxy, which only became plausible with the advent of rapid and large-scale information processing, has given politicians the illusion that if they have enough factual information at their fingertips they can predict and control the human world in much the same way as scientists can predict and control laboratory experiments. This is an example of misplaced concreteness, a philosophical mistake, a flawed way of thinking, and it continues to do much damage to the public services.

Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* pointed out this flaw two and a half thousand years

ago. The kind of precision and exactitude that is essential to geometry is inappropriate when applied to human affairs and practical situations, like education:

Precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions ... For it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things *just so far as the nature of the subject admits* [my italics].

Educational practices require the application of moral judgement as often as they need the measurement of facts. The facts of an educational situation will seldom 'speak for themselves'. Put simply, there can never be a single right answer or correct approach to meet the educational needs of a given learner or group of learners. Important aspects of human beings are ignored when everything in life is reduced to information and measurable quantities. As part of reclaiming and reinventing the language of education, professional educators will need to insist that their work can never be effectively micro-managed from a distance, even with the help of the most advanced computer power. Also, that some of their best or most effective educational work may not have a measurable product at the end of it. Other forms of accountability must be devised through which

they can justify spending taxpayers' money, and these will require a world view and a way of thinking far removed from the gospel according to McKinsey.

Aristotle may be regarded as out of date, but the continuing relevance of his insight is confirmed by the cutting-edge concept of 'emergence'. Much that was educationally good and democratic about general adult education might, in twenty-first century scientific parlance, be described as an 'emergent property'. Emergence is a crucial concept in the new sciences of complexity and self-organising systems. It describes the properties that have arisen as a result of the interactions of parts (including individuals) in a complex system, but which are not reducible to these parts or predictable from them. Emergent properties cannot, therefore, be measured or controlled at a distance, even though situations can be designed to encourage them. Good teachers have long known intuitively how to create a learning environment in which beneficial emergent properties can arise. It requires 'living qualities' and values that are lived from moment to moment in ways that are never going to be part of a mechanistic, utilitarian approach to education. Clarity of intention and the embodied and mind-full 'presence' of the teacher remain crucial, but learners too have to participate in determining the quality and the nature of the learning outcomes. Both the learning process and the learning product are therefore to be participative and evolving rather than managerial and controlling. Quality is intrinsic to the practice, not determined elsewhere, and sustainable societies of the future are likely to need education of this kind.

One of the more obvious challenges of the twenty-first century is a requirement to speed the transition of sustainability from a crackpot notion to a central place in mainstream politics and in economic theory and practice. The planet will not sustain the old economic models. Sooner or later, all advanced economies will have to place limits on growth, and their populations will have to reduce consumption. Most people have now accepted, therefore, that previously unquestioned concepts like wealth creation, gross national product and global competition have become problematic. This means that equating post-school education with work-related skills is also problematic. New thinking is needed. General adult education could be a part of this new thinking – and, indeed, a valuable vehicle for spreading the sustainability concept around the population. Is it too much to hope that in its next incarnation it will also be decently funded and properly supported by those in power?

Meanwhile, there are in the immediate present tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of men and women in this country who would delight in and benefit from the kinds of educational experience on offer 30 years ago.

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