

Leaving Adult Education

An Open Letter

Mike Cushman

When I first wrote about my thoughts on the present position of adult education as I am made redundant after 20 years in the field you asked me to rewrite it as a letter to appear in *Adults Learning*. I am pleased to do that; however, I must ask that in view of a letter I received recently no one from Lambeth Community Education reads any further.

The Assistant Director of Education in Lambeth responsible for Adult Education wrote to me as follows: '... I had already asked you not to have any contact with any staff in the community education service, except through me. This continues to apply and you will need to let me know of any contacts which you wish to make in future.' As that letter related to a conversation I had with a friend on sick leave, at home, one evening, the intention is obviously to be all-inclusive (exclusive?) and as I have always obeyed instructions, even ones that I believe ill-judged, I would not wish by writing in *Adults Learning* to attempt to circumvent the instruction. It is, however, becoming very difficult, because I live in Lambeth and people from community education wonder why I ignore them when I pass them in the street, or stand in a supermarket queue next to them. I suspect that my reputation for occasionally deviant behaviour is being re-inforced.

To get back to adult education, the importance of non-accredited courses is being forgotten in the light of the changing environment. There is a strong argument that the course provision, in Lambeth, as in much of the country, has become distorted by pressures from the LEAs, the FEFC and elsewhere: the current offer places too much emphasis on accreditation even where, as in Lambeth, the LEA remains a major direct provider. While all students have a right to have their learning recorded and, where possible, to have formal accreditation for it, should they so wish, this should not be required of them as a condition of participating. The emerging orthodoxy places too simple a frame on valuing learning. Attention is given to an end phenomenon – is a certificate gained? – rather than to the much more important question of ascertaining and supporting learning processes and purposes. The observations I want to make about Lambeth have a much wider relevance, and not just in the inner city areas.

There are, undoubtedly, many Lambeth residents who wish, legitimately, to increase the number of their formally acknowledged skills, usually in the hope of improving their employment prospects. Meeting this demand is the dominant purpose of the College and one of the purposes of community education. To see it as the main purpose of community education is to accept a false analysis of the challenges facing Lambeth residents.

These problems – a combination of racism, poverty, criminalisation and alienation – must not be reduced to a skills and qualification deficit model. If we do that, we

are part of the problem and not part of the solution. One of the roles of community education must be to allow people to re-vision their society through cultural, artistic, craft, performance and literary experience: to provide a space and a process where people can find, re-find and legitimise their perceptions and understandings of the environment in which they live and the forces governing their lives.

The accreditation model is an individualised, competitive solution which isolates people and implies that their previous failure is the cause of their problem. Their success will be at the expense of other people's failure. It does not change how many jobs there are and how many people are jobless, just which individual is in work and which in the dole queue; an absolutely crucial fact for the individual, but in collective terms a zero sum game.

Community education is also a space where people can explore their own cultural heritage, and that of others. It is a space where cultural diversity can be celebrated and opposed to a monochrome dominant culture. This would be important anywhere, the more so in a culturally diverse area and crucial in an area housing many refugees uprooted from their own culture and space. This is a far wider canvass for non-accredited work than a security blanket for newcomers to post-school education.

Accredited courses are what the FEFC fund us for and in so doing provide a viable structure for the unique service that adult education can offer. The offer of accredited courses more exists to support the non-accredited programme than vice-versa.

It is important that non-accredited courses continue to form a major part of a high-subsidy programme so that everyone has a choice of pottery and yoga as well as IT and maths. Otherwise the middle class get the courses they want and the poor get the classes that are good for them.

There is a real danger that people will see the answers as institutional and organisational rather than political and cultural. Debate will focus in what remains of free-standing adult education on whether transfer to a college would be a better option. It may secure some jobs and it may enhance the delivery and quality of the FEFC offer (although even there I have reservations about the ability of colleges to deliver that curriculum to many of the diverse groups and locations that community education reaches). It would, however, be a disaster for the work I am arguing for. One only has to look at the neighbouring borough: the college has already ended most off-site work and is now rationalising (closing) buildings like mad. They have no sense of push-chair distance and, for the students who have the greatest rights to our provision, assume a much higher degree of mobility around the borough than actually exists. This is not just a question of how

sympathetic the governors and managers are; the organisational and accounting imperatives of a large sector college are difficult, to the point of impossible, to resist.

Our task is to ensure that the debate focuses on three questions. What is the purpose of adult education? How can the tradition of self-defined learning that has enriched the lives of millions for over a century be secured in the future? Thirdly, if this tradition is to have the right to continue, how can it disproportionately meet the demands of the poor and those who got the rawest deal from schools?

The questions are not only for non-FEFC work. The curricula for literacy and numeracy are under threat. In their attempt to get nationally equivalent measures of success, the primary learning goals that we are allowed to recognise as legitimate for achievement funding are those which are nationally standard and not those that are articulated by the students.

I was re-reading *Let Loose*, the account written by the participants in the first ever national literacy residential event for learners and teachers, organised by Write First Time in 1978. One of the foci of the conference was the relationship of photography and literacy. Two learners (we were all learners of course, but some of us got paid for it), Glyn and Trevor, wrote about their experience of photography:

We were very surprised that it wasn't really very complicated. I always thought that it was one of those things that only highly-trained people could do – you know, you take it to the chemist and suddenly get it back later, without any idea of how it happened. Do you know what goes on inside Grunwick's?

When you do your own developing you can vary the backgrounds – you can under-develop or you can over develop as you want – whereas a process firm just prints them all the same; the point is that you're in control of the whole process.

Once you get the basic idea, it's like a formula; once you know how the chemicals combine, and what they are used for, it's pretty much common sense.

At first you're terrified of spoiling the whole thing, but at the end there's a great sense of achievement.

How many tariff units was that worth?

There is a broader question that arises: how in today's climate could an autonomous group of adult education participants be funded to produce a newspaper that transformed all of our understanding of the adult literacy and adult education process in this country? In 1976 we survived being banned in some counties for printing 'They learned me with bricks' in the first issue. The forces of standard English would have much more resonance with modern funding bodies than they did with a young and radical Adult Literacy Resource Agency.

The passion for re-organisation of public sector institutions so beloved of the government (if it can't privatise them) infects local councils and their education

departments as well. Each re-organisation must commence before the previous one is completed, for fear the staff will ever find out what they are doing and feel powerful enough to insist that their view of the world be listened to. I am drawn irresistibly to quotations from the first world war, and not just 'lions led by donkeys'. I cannot recall which French general said 'My flanks are in disarray, my centre is in turmoil, situation excellent, we must advance', but it resonates into the present; so does the general summary 'order, counter-order, disorder' and the level of internal communication is not much better than the message that was sent from the front line as 'send reinforcements, we are going to advance' and was heard by the general staff as 'send two and fourpence, we are going to a dance'. Sadly today the two and fourpence has been cut from the budget, and the dance class closed as it did not contribute to the attainment of NTETs.

I think the following anecdote from a local college describes some of the dilemmas:

A student got an ungraded mark in an A level last year. She wanted to retake the course but the college judged that she would not do significantly better in the course this year and would not admit her. She appealed as she recognised that although she may not do much better she still felt she would gain from repeating a rigorous course of study in a subject that interested her. If the college admitted her they would not get the 8 per cent of their funding for the achievement units even if the woman achieved her 'primary learning goal'.

For your homework you can answer the following questions (do not attempt to write on more than one side of the paper at once):

1. What should the College have done? – discuss
2. Which is more important, learning or qualification?
3. Do we want to have community education services where the FEFC's goals and not those of the students dominate?

I am now an adult returner and I am studying information systems. It is a course with a high proportion of both (to use their categories) EU and overseas students. It was shocking when talking to a student from Austria to hear her comment on the lack of parks and other public facilities in London. We have become so unambitious over the last 15 years that we sometimes forget how much ground we have lost. It is important to hear these perceptions from outside the system for the same reason we must always ask new staff whether our buildings are adequately sign-posted. We all accept the current far too easily until we are shocked out of it by someone who queries the new clothes catalogue, emperors for the use of.

One of the areas I am concentrating on at LSE is how information and knowledge are created and transmitted. In particular I am interested in how the categories into which knowledge is divided affect our understanding. This has particular reference to how data categories are defined and helps me understand the deep conceptual flaws in any tariff system for education. (The same applies to performance-related pay or any of the

attempts to produce spurious quasi-markets for non-quantifiable public services – by the way have you read Paul Ormerod's book, *The Death of Economics*, yet? It should be compulsory bed-time reading for anyone dallying with the idea that there can be a free market in anything, manufactured goods as well as public services, that optimises the distribution of resources). In trying to understand this area I turned to William Blake (always a good bet) and I found the following in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which is useful both for my studies and to realise that 200 years ago Blake described the process by which the creative impulse is constrained into reified knowledge.

A MEMORABLE FANCY

I was in a Printing house in Hell, & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation

In the first chamber was a Dragon-man, clearing away the rubbish from a cave's mouth; within, a number of Dragons were hollowing the cave.

In the second chamber was a Viper folding round the rock & the cave, and others adorning it with gold, silver and precious stones.

In the third chamber was an Eagle with wings and feathers of air: he caused the inside of the cave to be

infinite; around were numbers of Eagle-like men who built palaces in the immense cliffs.

In the fourth chamber were Lions of flaming fire, raging around & melting the metals into living fluids.

In the fifth chamber were Unnam'd forms, which cast the metals into the expanse.

There they were receiv'd by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the form of books & were arranged in libraries.

Going back to Blake also reminds me that there is no new knowledge, all my insights are those that I learned from colleagues, students and friends (and also from opponents). The only originality that any of us can claim is that sometimes we manage to re-order them so they make more sense or, as Blake says, 'What is now proved was once only imagin'd.'

Like everyone else I leave adult education knowing I have learned more than I taught. I can only hope that we can re-invent adult education so our younger sisters and brothers can have the same excitement that we have had in this field.

Mike Cushman was formerly head of adult education within Lambeth Community Education Service.

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