

Towards people's palaces of culture?

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Abstract

For more than 50 years, governmental and independent reviews have published proposals for strengthening adult learning opportunities, showing a remarkable consistency in the advice offered to government. They have, however, had little more than short-term impact on policy or provision. Since the early 2000s, under the influence of neoliberal thinking, UK policymaking has increasingly seen education, and particularly post-school education, as simply a tool to support the economic policies of the Treasury, with devastating consequences for adult participation in learning for a diversity of purposes. At the same time, the end of ring-fenced funding for adults in further and higher education has seen a decline and disappearance of provision for adult part-time and community-based adult learning. The article proposes relocating responsibility for community-based adult learning to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in order to recover stability of provision, to revitalise local authorities' role, and for adult learning to be, again, a source of joy and personal fulfilment.

Keywords: adult education policy and practice; community; informal learning; libraries; culture

Community-based adult education in Britain is in a parlous state. Since 2003, more than four million adults have been lost to publicly funded education in Britain. This is the result of a combination of savage cuts, with access to community-based adult learning particularly affected, and funding being shifted to support narrow utilitarian and neoliberal policies, as the Department for Education has become increasingly a vehicle for the delivery of Treasury economic policy. The result has been that such provision as there is for adults focuses on qualification-based courses closely linked to labour-market entry or progression. Any recognition of the wider purposes of lifelong and life-wide learning in fostering democratic citizenship, in stimulating creativity, fostering well-being, supporting life transitions and enriching later life is absent from current policy thinking. If we are to revitalise community-based adult learning it is time for a fresh start. I propose shifting responsibility for its funding – now – away from the Department for Education to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

I begin this article with a personal reflection on my experience working in a vibrant centre in the years before the Thatcher revolution, as a reminder of the richness possible in the work. I go on to note the consistency of advice offered to government over some 50 years and, with the notable exception of the years around the turn

of the 21st century, how regularly it has been ignored. Recognising this persistent marginalisation, I argue that responsibility for adult community learning should move to the government department charged with valuing and enriching culture, and I outline the case for community hubs in which adult learning provision coexists with other community services.

Friends Centre, Brighton

I was lucky to be appointed as principal, on the basic lecturer's salary, to the Friends Centre, an independent adult education centre based in the Quaker Meeting House in the centre of Brighton, in 1973. It offered an exciting blend of courses ranging from painting, dressmaking and languages to astronomy, women's studies, music appreciation, and environmental classes. A hundred and fifty people a week attended its programme for senior citizens, and 70 its world news classes. The first week I was there, Glubb Pasha (Sir John Glubb), who led the Jordanian army in 1948 at the time of the creation of Israel, taught a session on the background to the Arab-Israeli conflict, weeks before the Yom Kippur war. Pinochet's coup against Allende's government in Chile led to English classes for the political refugees who began to arrive weeks later.

Shortly after I joined the centre, inspired by Mike Newman's *Adult Education and Community Action*,¹ we organised a day school to look at ways of engaging groups under-represented in learning, and undertook outreach, seeking advice from people about what they felt they would like to learn more about. An early development resulting from this work was the establishment of an adult literacy scheme, focused on using learners' experiences and voices as a basis of learning materials. We quickly built on volunteer-taught one-to-one classes with a full-time professionally taught course in literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), funded by the government's Manpower Services Commission. A local MP, concerned that the materials used were inappropriate for people with 'vulnerable minds', called for inquiries into political bias from the three government bodies funding our work. Happily, after a scary month or two the government reported that not only were they not biased but they were the best materials seen so far, and published them through the national literacy agency.²

As in all good adult education centres, there was much more to the Friends Centre than classes. The canteen was a source of informal learning. Societies spun off from classes, ranging from a campaign for a homeless shelter that emerged from a class on popular planning, to the Brontë Society and natural history groups, meeting in the interstices of the class-based programme. The largest room was left available on Mondays for hire. The Save the West Pier campaign, the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding, the campaign for a homeless shelter, and debates about the Common

Market brought hundreds to the building. So did poetry readings by Yevtushenko and Allen Ginsberg, a short fiction course taught by Ian McEwan, and a meeting with Ivan Illich in a wildly overfilled hall. There were madrigals, piano recitals, visiting choirs. A weekend Ruskin History Workshop overspill event on women's history led to the first national women's studies in adult education event, run jointly with the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). It had, to my mind, many of the qualities of a real people's palace of culture.

Life at the centre went beyond the classes people attended. Borrowing an idea from Sussex University's student-run 'street library', the centre began a library of enthusiasm. People were asked to lend books they had enjoyed to an unpoliced centre library, open to any centre user to borrow, with the opportunity for the owner to take them back later. Seven thousand books, including a complete collection of Penguin and Pelican books, were contributed over the first weekend. They included 12 copies of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* – fashionable at the time. The library relied on trust, and of course built trust, too.³

Nowhere was this more evident than the centre's response to the East Sussex County Council decision in 1981 to eradicate all funding for adult education, saying 'people don't want to pay for tap dancing on the rates'. After petitions and public meetings made no impact, we decided to run a non-stop 24-hour-a-day teach-in, sponsored at a penny an hour as long as at least one person was studying at all times. We asked our staff and friends to offer one session free, making their ideas accessible to anyone who came, and participants could pay whatever they wanted for attending. I taught an all-night history of rock music for 88 people – who didn't want to go home at the end. There was a Messiah sing-in, a mock peace conference for the continuing war in Zimbabwe, an all-night film course on women in detective fiction, and another for pensioners on painting the night away. Thirty came at six in the morning for 'Sartre – a celebration', not many fewer for 'housing in Cuba'. Little happens at night, so we had daily visits from the Today programme on Radio 4, local and national television, and press response. Almost half the visitors had never been to a course before. Volunteers went to class, then helped in the kitchens, or cleaned the bathrooms. At the end of the week, again on national radio, the leader of the council said he had been badly advised, and the cuts were rescinded, and the centre thrived. Still, in 2020 the Friends Centre closed, starved of its modest funding. And with it went a focal point in the cultural life of Brighton.⁴

The Friends Centre was not unique. Similar cultural energies infuse the work of the City Lit, Morley College, the Working Men's College and Mary Ward Centre in London, the Brasshouse in Birmingham, the Folk House in Bristol, Swarthmore in Leeds, as well as local authority adult education centres, and the surviving residential colleges, Northern outside Barnsley, and Fircroft in Birmingham. Their corporate life is often marked by anniversary publications that capture the excitement, social

engagement and sheer love of learning their users experience.⁵ But the cuts in funding – begun with a shift of Labour policy in 2003, and accelerated during the coalition and Conservative years – have devastated the sector, despite recurrent celebrations of its role by government ministers.

Advice to government

In the 50 years since I began work at the Friends Centre, there have been, at roughly 10-yearly intervals, national reports on how to improve opportunities for adults to learn together.

1973's Russell report, the final report of the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education (ACACE) in 1982, the 1997 Fryer report, 2009's *Learning through Life*, and 2019's Centenary Commission report all called for a national strategy, for some form of overall development council bringing the different actors together. They called for parallel regional or subregional bodies to foster cooperation across sectoral boundaries, and to encourage effective links with health, cultural and employment bodies. They argued for the importance of developing credit accumulation and transfer; they highlighted the importance of information, advice and counselling. They urged measures to widen participation and to engage under-represented communities. They made the case for the role of learning at key transition points in the life course. And they argued for increased funding to address the challenges of the future. Yet, despite this consistency of advice, they were, broadly, ignored.⁶

In some ways, the reports were the victim of electoral shifts. The Russell report, commissioned under Labour, reported in 1973 to Margaret Thatcher, who barely said thank you, beyond noting that it would be of interest to 'the organisations directly concerned with adult education' before putting it on a high shelf to accumulate dust.⁷ Something similar happened to the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education, commissioned by Shirley Williams as Labour's secretary of state, which reported to a far less sympathetic Conservative government. ACACE called for a development council with a budget annually of £1,500,000; government offered just £50,000 for a short-life Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education, solely addressing government priorities. The same fate awaited the 2009 and 2019 reports, both the product of independent commissions of inquiry.

The Blunkett years

However, the 1990s created a different context for the 1997 report. New legislation in 1992 removed responsibility for adult education from local government and transferred it to the new Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). This did, for a while, lead to an expansion of courses bearing, or leading to, a qualification, but left learning for pleasure

substantially unsupported. At the same time, dedicated budgets for adult education in universities were 'mainstreamed', with the resulting decline and disappearance of extramural departments from most universities.

In the mid-1990s, a new consensus emerged among industrial countries, encouraged by the OECD, UNESCO and the European Union, that lifelong learning was a key to economic prosperity and social cohesion. In 1997, in his first speech as secretary of state for education and employment, David Blunkett announced the creation of a National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (NAGCELL), chaired by Bob Fryer, to report in three months. Like its predecessors, its recommendations called for a national strategic framework, for mechanisms to widen participation, for ways to foster inter-agency cooperation, for adult guidance, for ways to secure improved data, and for a focus on the home and community as well as the workplace. Blunkett received the advice warmly. His introduction to the government's subsequent green paper made a lyrical case for community learning:

We are fortunate in this country to have a great tradition of learning. We have inherited the legacy of the great self-help movements of the Victorian industrial communities. Men and women, frequently living in desperate poverty, were determined to improve themselves and their families. They did so through the creation of libraries, study at workers' institutes, through the pioneering efforts of the early trade unions, at evening classes, through public lectures and by correspondence courses. Learning enriched their lives and they, in turn, enriched the whole of society ...

As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings.⁸

What followed was a plethora of initiatives funded by dedicated pots of funding for innovation. Prompted by a 1999 report by Claus Moser, 'Skills for life', a national strategy for literacy, numeracy and ESOL, was set up, and secured a first qualification for 5.5 million people in its 10-year lifespan.⁹ Individual learning accounts were launched, met with huge demand, but crashed over weak financial and quality oversight. Initiatives to foster wider participation included: provision for older people; the creation of a Union Learning Fund; measures to strengthen community provision; and new work with general practitioners to prescribe community learning rather than more pills. Among the innovations were support for disabled adults and for community learning centres, a distinct programme offering neighbourhood learning in deprived communities, and a

range of other effective inclusion projects. All were of relevance to the palaces of culture I argue for in this paper.¹⁰

When a new funding agency was created by government in 2001, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) had the strongest commitment to community-based learning of any UK government written into its remit.¹¹ Alas, just as it began life Blunkett was moved from education to the Home Office, and with him went much of the impetus to foster life-wide learning.

Accelerating decline

From 2003, money was shifted sharply from community learning to ‘Train to gain’, a scheme which paid employers to train their staff. Among its results was that companies like Tesco used government money, rather than its own, to pay for its existing staff training. The overall decline in adult participation in publicly supported learning began at this point. In higher education it was exacerbated by the decision in 2008 to deny support for any study at the same or lower level than a learner had already achieved. By the mid-2000s, many of these initiatives withered, as funds declined.¹²

Despite the warm words of Vince Cable (secretary of state 2010-2015), who spoke movingly of the impact of adult learning on his parents’ lives, from 2010 the coalition and Conservative governments’ funding reductions accelerated the drop in adult learning participation in further and adult education, and the drop in part-time study in higher education after 2010 was dramatic.

Overall, then, in the 1970s and for much of the 1980s community-based adult learning in England experienced benign neglect, and for a short period at the turn of the century a thousand flowers bloomed with innovative ideas encouraged and community centres supported. Shortly after the Blunkett era ended in 2003, however, a new orthodoxy emerged, where the Treasury saw further (and increasingly higher) education simply as a vehicle to support its neoliberal economic policies, with a strong focus on skills for the existing labour market. Common to the New Labour, coalition and Tory policies was a sharp marginalisation of learning for anything other than short-term utilitarian goals.

Yet successive governments have been given clear advice on the wider social benefits of learning. Apart from the major reports outlined above, the 2008 Foresight study on mental well-being argued that continuing learning was one of five key components of well-being and health in later life.¹³ The 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals made clear that almost all of the 17 goals adopted by nation states relied on the active learning of adult citizens, and that adult learning was a key catalyst in securing inclusive social development.¹⁴ That was a major reason for the Centenary Commission on Adult Education to reassert the call of the 1919 report for adult education to be seen

as a 'permanent national necessity'.¹⁵

There is more to adult learning than the acquisition of qualifications for labour-market entry. People need access to learning at transition points throughout their adult lives. Before and after children are born, as jobs change at work, on promotion or redundancy, when children leave home, adapting to retirement and dealing with grieving all present challenges where the chance to explore with others enhances our ability to live resilient, resourceful and engaged lives. Adult classes can be invaluable for people recovering from periods of mental illness, and can help motivate people to maintain flexibility and fitness. As David Blunkett made clear in the introduction to *The Learning Age*, adults turn to learning, too, to explore their creativity, to make culture, making things, to enjoy the arts, music and sport.

The case for a change

The evidence of the last quarter century is that there is little prospect of these arguments holding much sway in post-school education and skills policy at a time when we clearly need a better skilled and educated workforce. The modest spending on the full range of life-wide learning just doesn't command enough space in policymakers' attention. There is little policy memory among civil servants, and as we consider how to revitalise attention to the learning needs of adults there seem few prospects of securing an early shift in Department for Education thinking. It is scarcely an accident that there was no mention of adult education in the 2024 election manifestoes.

Of course, adult education has not been alone as a service in experiencing the devastation induced by austerity policies. In the period since George Osborne's austerity policies were introduced in 2010, libraries have been decimated, and those that survive often open for significantly reduced times. Public spaces, including sports facilities, have been cut back. Youth services, too, have seen unparalleled reductions in budgets. Local authorities, starved of funding, have reluctantly cut and cut services lacking legislative protection.

Nevertheless, there is a powerful argument that community-based informal and non-formal adult education would find the best home for its renaissance through an alliance between colleagues serving communities through libraries, youth services and the arts, working with revitalised local authorities, and within a national framework hosted by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Each service offers a key component in regenerating a less isolating and private culture, and in making the case for the valuing of public facilities in community settings. Importantly, the values and purposes of community-based adult education are consistent with the remit of DCMS, and offer useful possibilities for synergy with other community services.

The richness of culturally diverse activities that characterised the Friends Centre

attracted people across the range of associational life in Brighton. However, more could be done in recapturing that experience in accessible multipurpose cultural centres. In such centres, adult classes, youth facilities, the library, an information and guidance service, a GP's practice, a community police post, early years activities, and space for the rich range of voluntary associations would coexist. Many centres would use existing repurposed buildings. From such centres, or people's palaces of culture, outreach services could provide for those unable or less willing to attend a thriving public space. They would complement classes held in schools out of hours, with continuity secured by local authorities in their schools, or negotiated, as now, in academy schools. For adult students wanting to secure progression in their studies, close links with further education services, backed by credit recognition and transfer arrangements, would continue, backed by exactly the cross-sectoral local development councils argued for in almost all the reports outlined above. They would offer a first step, or multiple steps to re-engage with learning, basic skills provision, and a warm welcome.

Of course, it can be argued that such a vision is unachievable without adequate resourcing, and that is self-evident. But the case needed to secure funds for adult education is paralleled in each of the partner services outlined above, and together they make for a more coherent case for the cultural enhancement of community life. And it would, as I argue above, fit the remit of DCMS more comfortably than the qualifications-driven Department for Education. The very process of transferring resources would draw widespread attention afresh to the way life-wide learning contributes to social well-being, and the synergies to be gained from sharing resources with sister agencies would spawn new beginnings.

With a new government focused on re-engaging with the communities it serves, the new funds required would be modest, and the benefits to physical and mental health, to community connectedness, to rebuilding shared trust would be palpable. Such a vision will not happen overnight. And, of course, to persuade policymakers to commit additional funds will involve working together to make a coherent and inclusive strategy, and showing how resources can be used effectively. Given good will, it should be possible to develop a persuasive case, to share it widely and to pilot a network of community hubs (or people's palaces of culture) within the lifetime of a single parliament. And what fun it would be to work with colleagues across sectors to realise such revitalised services, to unlock fresh energies and creativity in all our communities.

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Notes

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