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Is Our History Bunk? Adult Education's Historiography and the Notion of "Learning Society"

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Abstract. The notion of "learning society" presents a paradigm shift necessitating radical rethought of approaches to historical research in adult education. This paper re-evaluates the English-language historiography of adult education from a "learning society" perspective.

The "Learning Society": Breaking with History

"How can anyone claim to know the truth about history?", Henry Ford asked John Reed, when it "is being rewritten every year from a new point of view" (quoted Burlingame 1957: 9). The mild frisson of unmasking a high priest of Modernism mouthing the Post-modern creed should not distract us from the deeper significance of this Fordian view of history: To modernisers (be they Modern or Post-modern), the past is primarily impediment to change rather than source of understanding.

A key feature in contemporary "modernising" projects for Western societies and economies has been the emphasis on "lifelong learning" within a "learning society" (Holford et al., in press). As policy, the modernising advocates of this "learning society" seek a break from the past, and are rapidly constructing a discourse either shorn of history, or by doing violence to the truth (Boshier, in press). At a theoretical level, too, the learning society is conceived as descriptive of a novel world. Jarvis (in press) identifies three main interpretations in contemporary literature. The learning society "as reflexive society" is based on understandings of modernity as risky and in constant flux; learning is an essential coping strategy. The learning society as market phenomenon emphasises the recent reinvention of knowledge as a "desirable" and tradeable commodity. Broadly, the learning society as policy rests within these two interpretations.

There is also a utopian interpretation: the learning society as "futuristic". This provides a foundation for educationalists' dreams, but also a yardstick against which to measure policy prescriptions. This ideal-type approach can be illuminating. Barnett (1997: 158), for example, argues that a learning society is "necessarily a critical society [with] ... developed capacities for reflexivity at the societal level"; he very explicitly uses the concept to encapsulate a theoretical and political perspective drawn largely from Habermas. While we can set up an ideal-typical "learning society" and invest it with whatever content we think fit, it is less clear that it is valuable, or even valid, to use the notion "learning society" descriptively. To assert that late modern, or post-modern, or post-industrial, societies are "learning" societies in some way which earlier societies were not begs some central questions. Did people not learn in pre-modern, or modern, societies? On what grounds can we assert that more learning takes place today than formerly? If we believe only that learning today is different (rather than quantitatively greater), on what grounds do we attach the label "learning" to society today?

The literature suggests an answer framed in terms of rapid change and unpredictability. Yet such a response raises a host of problems. It assumes, for example, a quantitative model of learning and of knowledge. It privileges certain forms of knowledge: contemporary over past; technological over spiritual, relational, or empathetic; that conducive to adaptation over that which promotes stability. Dangerously, it encourages us to attach the labels "knowledge" and "learning" only to specific forms "relevant" to survival within a late modern context.

In stressing its limitations, however, we should ignore neither the positive contribution, nor the potential, of the learning society idea. A paradigm has been broken; this paper seeks to move on. It argues for wresting the notion of learning society away from the dominant discourses of "modernisation" and change. In particular, it explores how we might begin to construct an historicised notion of "learning society". A natural starting point for an attempt to historicise the notion of learning society is a survey and analysis of the historiography of adult education. This paper begins this process, concentrating on literature in English.

Institutionalism in Adult Education's Historiography

The English-language historiography of adult education is dominated by two "national histories". Associated with the "glory days" of institutionalised adult education in the 1960s, Kelly (1970; first edition 1962) and Knowles (1977; first edition 1962) provided comprehensive accounts of the growth of the English and US "movements". Their breadth of scholarship remains in many ways impressive. But these works appear problematic, even unhelpful, from a learning society perspective.

Methodologically, these national histories are overwhelmingly institutional. The history of adult education becomes the history of institutions which have educated adults. The teleological nature of this approach is now apparent: the object of historical study was to explain, or merely recount, the process by which "the present" was reached. Since "present" adult education was conceived in terms of specific institutions and approaches, so its history was ipso facto their history. As a result, learning and education have been abstracted from their social contexts.

One example will perhaps illustrate. Kelly (1970: 1) asserts that "the earliest motive for adult education [in Britain] was religious", and "the first recorded adult educators were missionaries who came ... to convert the heathen inhabitants ..." On reflection, however, this is hardly a sustainable claim from a learning society perspective. Pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon society, like most "primitive" societies, had complex social institutions. The archaeological record shows that Anglo-Saxon craftsmanship was of a high order. Anglo-Saxon kingship involved a kind of "educational relationship" between king and "following" (Brooke : 55). Even the art and skills of war had to be learnt: hunting "accustomed men to swift rapid and effective action in the field ... [and] kept them in training" (Brooke: 60). The recitation of heroic sagas has been seen as involving "lessons" about the nature of strong rule, relationship of king and followers, etc. (Whitelock 1951). The saga poets (some of them, at least) had considerable literary, historical and rhetorical skills. The Beowulf poet, for example, was "a learned man":

to his task the poet brought a considerable learning in native lays and traditions: only by learning and training could such things be acquired, they were no more born naturally into Englishmen of the seventh or eighth centuries, by simple virtue of being an Anglo-Saxon, than ready-made knowledge of poetry and history is inherited at birth by modern children. (Tolkien 1936: 28)

Pagan society involved a substantial body of "superstitious" knowledge or lore, covering for example the medicinal properties of various plants (Mayr-Harting 1972: 28). There was "an established professional [pagan] priesthood, governed by its own rules of conduct, and that there were temples ... which were substantial enough for centres of worship to have their own enclosures." (Mayr-Harting 1972: 23)

While to criticise the history of education is in some ways unfair, it points to serious limitations in this literature from a learning society perspective. "Institutionalism" has tended to decontextualise historical evidence. Meaning has been derived chiefly from modern contexts, and attention has centred on those elements which have clear continuity with the present. The range of historical methodologies and modes of explanation has been limited. In the case quoted above, for example, Kelly privileges documentary evidence, paying scant regard to archaeological or anthropological research.

Institutionalism was, of course, linked to a specific ("professional") view of the role of history. In practice, adult education history has chiefly been "done" by graduate students trained not in historical perspectives and

methodologies, but in the apparatus of educational theory; or by present or former adult education practitioners. The resulting body of literature, though quite large, focuses on provision in specific fields or localities, or by certain institutions or movements, or on the contribution of outstanding individuals. Though not without strengths, this literature provides little which helps in historical analysis of societies as learning societies. This deficiency is starkly apparent in the latest, perhaps final, major contribution in this vein (Fieldhouse et al. 1996). In this, British adult education is neatly dissected into various areas of provision, each of which is treated to its own potted institutional history. As Fieldhouse himself admits, this "over-emphasise[s] formal and institutionalised learning at the expense of the less-well-recorded autodidactic tradition" (1996: vii-viii).

Towards a Socially-Contextualised History of Learning

In seeking to delineate the main features of a socially contextualised history of learning, we can turn to contributions which have in various ways broken the bounds of the institutional approach to adult education history. These fall into three main categories:

First, a number of historians have seen adult education as being intimately linked to wider social movements, and have sought to explain historical developments in these contexts. The outstanding work is unquestionably Harrison (1961), which not only brings nineteenth century English adult education alive, but locates it in within a web of competing and interacting forms of knowledge (religious dissent, self-help and "getting on", political reform, laissez faire, socialism, co-operation, and so forth). More recently, valuable contributions have included Schied (1993) and Welton (1987).

Second, adult education history has occasionally been written by "outsiders". The results are not always encouraging, but two examples do stand out. The more substantial is Kett (1994), who bases his account of the transition "from self-improvement to adult education in America" over 240 years on considerable scholarship. He sees "self-improvement" as encapsulating a characteristically American attitude to knowledge (and learning). Without endorsing his argument, part of its strength lies in his taking adult education as a socially constructed phenomenon to be studied, rather than as an institution to be justified. Macintyre's (1980) investigation of adult education arises from his attempt to explain the social construction of British marxism as a form of knowledge. This took a particular form, he argues, in part because of the character of the labour college movement, and an "autodidact" tradition established within British working class culture.

A third and rather different type of contribution has sometimes arisen when historical investigation has been carried out within, or been stimulated by, an adult educational process. Strictly speaking, these are not so much contributions to the history of adult education or learning as histories nourished and shaped in adult educational milieux. In some celebrated cases (Thompson 1963; Williams 1961) they have been seminal in shaping or reshaping whole disciplinary areas. Their significance here is that they proceed in part by problematising and deconstructing forms of knowledge: their emphasis is on how people made sense of their worlds, as well as how they sought to change it.

These examples suggest how a "learning society" perspective could shift attention from the history of education to the social construction and evolution of forms of learning and knowledge. Thus refocused on central concerns of social and educational inquiry, historical scholarship would be revitalised. Institutionally-oriented historical research has appeared increasingly arcane as educational institutions themselves are revealed as transient and contingent. Contemporary non-historical scholarship in education and related fields places increasing emphasis on the relationship between learning and social context. We have begun to see how these interact in relation to such dimensions as gender (e.g., Belenky et al. 1986) and ethnicity (e.g., Watkins & Biggs 1996); but this research has been overwhelmingly synchronic.

The central premise of such an approach in historical research would be to accept that every human society is a learning society; from this it can proceed to investigations of the nature of learning and knowledge in the past. Typical questions might be: How have opportunities and capacities for learning been socially distributed in various societies? What social and institutional processes have led to the construction of various forms of knowledge historically? This approach by no means precludes researching the history of education and training (which have for long periods been key social mechanisms by which knowledge is produced and distributed); but they are taken as particular, rather than general, forms.

The Audience for History

A key problem for adult education history has been its narrow audience. "Our" historians have spoken to a small profession, few of whom have shown much inclination to listen. No longer under even the limited protection afforded by the notion of "foundation disciplines", historians of adult education have found demonstrating the relevance of their work increasingly difficult. Could the history of adult learning in social context have a wider audience? While this question must remain open, there are some grounds for suggesting an affirmative answer. The main reason, perhaps paradoxically, is the pace of contemporary social change.

A single illustration must suffice by way of conclusion. "Modernisers" tend to see the past as marked by stability, even inflexibility. This is at best gross oversimplification. Many historical periods have been marked by rapid, unpredictable, change. Much has occurred as a result of ineluctable global pressures. In such situations, human beings have had rapidly to learn. Unfortunately, while there is much evidence of their capacity to do so, what and how they learn is not always pretty. Browning (1992), for instance, shows in vivid and alarming detail how a battalion of reserve police officers learnt to play their part in the "final solution" during 1942-43. He presents a finely textured account of a gruesome episode, in which some very "ordinary men" not only learnt the technical tricks of the mass murder trade, but (by and large) learnt to come to terms with the horror of what they did. Though impassioned advocates of the "learning organisation" would no doubt recoil from the implication, this was, of course, a process of organisational learning. It suggests strongly the need to problematise ethical as well as technical dimensions in organisational learning. In the context of rapid change, men and women learn the bad as well as the good; and most of all they learn what "works".

This paper has argued that a "learning society" perspective, albeit flawed and as yet under-theorised, can revitalise the role of history in scholarship for "our" field. The range of topic appropriate to historical research on socially-contextualised adult learning is far greater than that appropriate to "history of adult education" as traditionally conceived. Methodologically, the options available are much wider. The links between oral history, biography, experience and learning present fascinating possibilities (see, e.g., Thomson 1996). How people learn in stable and changing social contexts, what the meaning and impact of different patterns of learning has been, how knowledge has been created and distributed socially: these are key issues which historical investigation can illuminate. More important, it is only through historical investigation that we can best consider many complex and sometimes troubling issues which anyone professionally concerned with the business of learning should address.

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