

# “You Don’t Know What You’ve Got Till Its Gone”: The Decline and Marginalisation of Adult Education

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a short overview of characteristics frequently associated with adult education such as independence, informality, discovery and self-expression and provides a brief historical overview of some of the main developments. It is argued that the twentieth first century adult educational agenda is informed by narrow economic determinants with the short term aim of enhancing employment skills, pragmatism replacing aesthetics, which is in direct contrast to early pioneers who saw it as a movement towards enhancing democratic principles, a context for challenging hegemonic norms and as a process for self and societal enhancement. It is felt that such reductionism is a sad loss and reflects a new agenda of educational reductionism.

## Keywords

Discovery | Liberation | Participation | Radicalism

## INTRODUCTION

Adult education and its close cousin liberal education have a history of motivating and engaging learners within informal settings. At its most radical, it is shaped by attempting to engage non-traditional learners in ideas and concepts, frequently negotiated with tutors, who act as facilitators rather than instructors. Knowledge and understanding therefore frequently is an experiential process of discovery and reflection. As will be illustrated later, there was a vibrant period of adult education, nationally now only found as small pockets within County Council education budgets, which had no exams, qualifications or learning outcomes beyond the pleasure and wonder of learning. This paper provides a very brief overview of salient periods in the history within the United Kingdom and has at its core a lament for a model that valued education as a means in itself which has been mostly replaced by a mechanistic vocational model informed by the neo-liberal agenda of education’s purpose is to be a driver for economic growth.

## Definitions and Rationale

In one sense this would appear a simple task, adult education is provision for those over the age of 18. However, when delved into, it quickly becomes apparent that it actually is a complex nuanced model which encompasses a wide variety of approaches with distinct characteristics. As [Lindeman \(1926, p. 4\)](#) so succinctly recognised so many years ago, ‘this new venture is called adult education not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits’. [Martin \(2010\)](#) contends a central tenet is to inform the role of active citizenship as part of democratic deliberation. Within a different context in a pioneering exposition as to the

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nature of learning, but with connections to ideas of democratic participation, Knowles (1950, p.9) recognised the importance and power of groups in situating learning, 'Attitudes and opinions are formed primarily in the study groups, work groups and play groups with which adults affiliate voluntarily. These groups are the foundation stones of our democracy. Their goals largely determine the goals of our society'. Linked to this humanistic view Darkenwald and Merriam (1982, p. 9) felt that a crucial aspect or purpose is that adult education concentrates not so much on 'preparing people for life, but rather with helping people to live more', a lovely distinction which captures its on-going transitional nature and alludes to the feel of community and ownership of experience.

As will be quickly appreciated from the short historical overview following, adult education has been developed and shaped by a strong political agenda, mostly leaning towards an agenda of egalitarianism and rights with several commentators interpreting its rationale as emancipatory in terms of challenging political hegemonies. Brookfield and Holst (2011, xiii) are unambiguous in claiming the impetus, and largely the purpose is, 'adult learning is inextricably tied to extending political and economic democracy – to equalizing democratic control of and access to health, education, health care, and creative work, and to promoting collective and cooperative forms of decision making and labour'. To an extent, this reflects Fromm (1941) who had expectations of adult education being able to liberate through awareness the ideological manipulation of capitalism. Freire's (1970) conscious raising approaches to liberation and Gramsci (1971) who saw the position of a worker to be manipulated by the 'manufacture of consent' further explore this dimension, Coben (1998) providing a fascinating analysis of their influence. This is heady, radical, powerful and perhaps even deemed by some to be dangerous with its revolutionary intent to challenge societal norms, but was, and to a much smaller extent still is, a part of what adult education is and can achieve.

## Brief Historical Markers

This section does not intend to provide a comprehensive appraisal of the historical development of adult education but rather intends to identify a few significant markers to illustrate distinctive characteristics.

Stating with certainty what the first example of adult education was is problematical but a useful starting point -note the radical intent- is the Adult Schools. The first began in 1798 in Nottingham by a Quaker, Samuel Fox, and a Methodist, William Singleton, for women working in the lace industry (Rowntree and Binns, 1903). The

movement spread, albeit numbers were small, and essentially they were Sunday morning classes examining the New Testament from a non-denominational perspective (Kelly, 1970). By the end of the nineteenth century there were approximately 350 schools involving 45,000 students (Rowntree and Binns, 1903) and there were radical innovations as with Joseph Surge's Severn Street School which taught arithmetic, geography and grammar. Much of the intent was to begin an understanding of Quaker radicalism and reflected the movement's philosophy of discussion and fellowship. There were even book and library clubs, savings banks, sick funds and temperance societies. Adult education then had a strong base of activism and purpose from which to evolve. By the start of the First World War, Adult Schools had almost ceased to exist as the world moved to a new pragmatism and other organisations gained prominence, the most influential perhaps being the Workers Educational Association.

The Workers Educational Association (WEA) was founded in 1903 and, as its name suggests, was concerned with rights and emancipation with education as a social force. As an adult education provider, its ethos remains 'A better world, equal and just'. To this day, it remains a charity. It has had many aspirational and influential presidents though arguably Richard Tawney was the best known. Tawney stayed at Toynbee Hall, where the WEA began, and he began to become involved with luminaries such as Alfred Mansbridge who had advocated closer links with cooperatives and trade unions (Fieldhouse, 1996) to create an organisation that promoted 'The Higher Education of Working Men'. Tawney combined a deep Christian faith with socialism and saw education as one of the prime movers for reshaping society towards egalitarianism and also fellowship as well as promoting ideas of 'self-fulfilment'. Barnett (1898, p.20), when describing Toynbee Hall, captures the spirit of intensity and verve:

It seems to be a centre of education, a mission, a polytechnic, another example of philanthropic machinery; it is really a club and the various activities have their root and their life in the individuality of its members.

An important parallel were the mechanics institutes from the 1820s to 90s who also targeted the working class, radically at the time catering for female workers too, and were highly influential in developing the still widespread further education college provision (Walker, 2016).

By the start of the twentieth century there was a further shift, following the horrors of The Great War, with a fresh passion to create a better society that would never repeat

such mistakes and at its core would be adult education following the 1919 Report on Adult Education which led to Local Education authorities becoming responsible for provision. It shaped much of what followed and the strength of the ideas remains inspirational. It is worth noting it was instigated by The Ministry of Reconstruction ([British Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919](#)), clearly they were trying to build a new future. To quote just a few sentences as illustration of the impetus and drive of ideas:

Most of the subjects of political, social or industrial interest are highly controversial; the very fact that there are conflicts of view upon the problems of social life and organisation, so far from being a justification for the exclusion of controversial questions, is a strong reason for study and the fullest discussion ([Barnett, 1898 p.203](#)).

Classes conforming to requirements rendering them eligible for grant are by no means the only form of sound educational work. Study circles, discussion classes, conferences, courses of lectures, and activities of a less systematic character are in varying degrees and in different ways valuable means of education. They may be carried on in adult schools, working men's clubs, or trade union branches; they are, in fact, facilities taken to the students in places where they are accustomed to assemble ([Barnett, 1898 p.206](#)).

Advanced study following upon the work of the continuation classes will meet the needs of some; an introduction to the philosophical, economic and political studies which are so prominent a feature of adult education may appeal to the more precocious; and opportunities in both directions should be made available. For a larger number it appears to us that music, folk dances, and literature and the drama, on the one hand, and creative handwork, on the other, will provide appropriate opportunities for self-expression. To these we would add games and physical pursuits ([Barnett, 1898 p.208](#)).

I quote at length to show how nearly 100 years ago there was a vision of a system based on self-expression, cooperation, discovery, a deeply humanistic model, with not a qualification in sight, education was emancipatory and justified by its own existence. It is no coincidence that NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) began in 1921 which became a lead organisation in campaigning until 2016 when it merged with the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion to form the new Learning and Work Institute ([Hughes et al., 2016](#)).

There was now a new impetus, with many universities having Continuing Education departments and trade unions offering classes in parallel with local authorities and voluntary organisations ([Hughes et al., 2016](#)). The cooperative movement was particularly influential starting its first adult classes in Rochdale in 1850. [Jackson \(2016\)](#) provides a fascinating insight of early twentieth century Lincoln where the cooperative movement provided an invaluable and liberating addition to working class people's life opportunities.

The post Second World War period again started with the impetus to rebuild Britain into a better place for future generations and to learn from the mistakes of the conflict. The start was inauspicious with the 1944 Education Act -also known as The 'Butler Act named after a Conservative government minister- created a tripartite system of schooling. This accorded humankind attributes suitable for grammar, technical or secondary modern schools, ensuring a privileged few benefiting from education with the masses being needed for feeding the economic base; a myth of entitlement still perpetuated today. This resulted in a new move towards adult education as people tried to undue the unfairness of selection and take up opportunities denied by selection.

The Fifties saw a new culture of 'angry young men' as a backlash to the deprivation arising from the war, (John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Alan Sillitoe). This resulted in the publication of challenging texts such as Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* ([Hoggart, 1957](#)) which examined ideas of mass communication and how ideas are shaped by organised communication. It was the forerunner of media studies and Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* ([Williams, 1958](#)) which redefined ideas of culture away from established beliefs of elitism to the industrial revolution. Such works informed adult education via universities and a new impetus of ideas was evolving. The 1960s continued the radicalism, The Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) being a leading innovator and there was also a change to widening participation through youth and community centres and also the start of The Open University which was adult education for all from home. The [Russell Report \(1973\)](#) invited learning opportunities for all with university extra-mural departments leading on the provision of liberal adult education based upon intellectuality and scholarship with no requirement of external assessments of qualifications.

As can be seen, there is a strong thread from its inception for independence of thought, opportunities for debate and challenging the status quo with communities of action, even radicalism, which had a political edge. The new post '1945 vocationalism' began to influence the form and, to jump

forward, the Conservative administration of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher decided upon a new pragmatism and adult education decline began. Education was now to have a measureable purpose, being economically informed, lead to qualifications for employment and be centrally regulated. She disbanded the ILEA and adult education funding was reduced and to be only related to employment and skills. A critical change was in 1991 with the White Paper Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century leading to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which took powers away from local authorities. Funding was now from the centrally administered Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) where adult education had to have a qualification linked to each subject, a student had to progress to a new level each year with no repeat within a load banded number of hours and there was an upper limit of level 3. This was almost the final nail in the coffin, adult education had now been subsumed into the rhetoric of monetarism.

## The Present Struggle for Identity

According to the 1919 Report, 'One of the greatest evils which can befall education is a rigid uniformity. It inevitably devitalises education of every kind', a profound observation which 100 years later haunts present adult education advocates as the march continues towards vocationalisation with an approach of unchallengeable central government control mechanisms and decreasing budget formulae. The reduction of provision has also been of enormous concern, the figures are staggering. [Sperlinger \(2014\)](#) succinctly describes the extra-mural adult education change. He describes Bristol, where just for those in the Services between 1939-45, there were 50,000 meetings and even by 1974 there were annually 7,570 meetings. However, Bristol's department closed in 1998. [Robertson \(2017\)](#) noted that between 2014 and 2015 there was a 10.8% reduction in adult learners arising from a 40% reduction of the adult skills budget between 2010 and 2015. [Bevington \(2016\)](#) notes adult education amounts to only 0.5% of government expenditure or a meager 6.5% of the education budget. As the Adult Education report, too important to be left to chance ([Bevington, 2016](#)), notes in a recommendation:

'National and local provision for adults' needs to reflect a coherent view of our changing social, economic and cultural context. The matter of identity, of how people describe who they are and the values they hold is an important conversation to be had with Commissioners in local areas. We learned from adults who were not engaged in adult education that many felt vulnerable, had limited choice on what was available when it comes to addressing their feelings of isolation, loneliness,

mental and physical challenges.

Here is a key point: the potential for adult education to help transform lives as an interventionist strategy or catalyst for social enhancement. It seems extraordinary that it now has so low a profile, compared with the impetus and excitement of the 1919 quotes above.

The Learning Age ([HMSO, 1998](#)) green paper was a bold statement of intent and included a wider educational view than a business and skill orientation, as illustrated by the following: 'Opportunities to learn will lead us to greater appreciation of art, music, poetry and literature, and develop our potential as rounded human beings with a vision of learning that promotes equality, spiritual development and citizenship' ([HMSO, 1998 p.2](#)). However, despite the rhetoric, 1.4 million fewer learners are studying since then.

A few short anecdotes from my own involvement illustrates the power of adult education. In a poetry appreciation class, Stevie Smith's Not Waving But Drowning was analysed and a student afterwards, in tears, thanked me for the insightful understanding of her own life; she felt she was drowning following the recent passing of her husband. Afterwards she felt empowered, the cathartic experience helping her in her own understanding. Another was a discussion of Heidegger's Being and Time which somehow became applied to the film *Trainspotting*, working people making sense of the world via philosophy. I was once privileged to observe a 'physical education' lesson in a care home where residents slumped in a chair suddenly excitedly and animatedly joined in a game of patting balloons. I could give many, many examples. Each was special, each was emancipatory and each was informed simply by the value of being human. Why on earth has such decent wonder been allowed to end? [Clancy \(2011\)](#) describes a project with 100 residents in Knowsley changing empty wasteland spaces into community gardens and in Manchester, drama courses for 20 tenants with drug, alcohol and mental health problems helped change their lifestyles. This is more than kind benevolence, an indulgence for the disadvantaged, but an approach that can have a profound influence with benefits for social care, criminal justice and housing. Yes, skills and employment are important, but why have they been allowed to subsume so much that went before when so much evidence exists of adult education's wider benefits?

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, adult education as a distinctive approach to learning engagement has significantly changed since its inception. The pioneering radicalism and the impetus to celebrate learning for its own sake requiring no justification other than it is integral to being human and improving society mostly



having disappeared. There are nationally still pockets and there remain several active organisations but, as a movement, it has become a small piece of the education jigsaw. This, I feel, is a sad indictment of a society now viewing education as a driver for economic determinants which has subsumed the intrinsic value of education as a living on-going process of enlightenment and discovery. Whittaker and Offord (2015) report that 190,000 course places were lost in 2015/16 and that if the budget cuts continue unabated at the same rate, there will be no adult education by 2020. However, there was a brief respite from April 2017. The new Education and Skills Funding Agency announced a fixed 4 year adult education budget which will mean a smaller a smaller cut than in recent years. However, much of this is entirely targeted at skills acquisition, so the concern of the wider purpose remains.

The conclusion sadly therefore is somewhat pessimistic. There is little evidence of a government appetite to return to the excitement of the start of the twentieth century and the heady mid century verve of education as a force for social change but rather now an insistence on measureable vocational outcomes as skills enhancement, a narrow model, the oeuvre, like my student, now Not waving but drowning.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and approved it for publication.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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