

Graham Birkin, adult educator, 1948 - 2020

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Our great friend and former colleague, Graham Birkin, died peacefully at home in Sheffield in July, after a long illness. He was an adult education tutor and community worker who devoted his working life to helping people overcome educational disadvantage and tackle social inequality.

Graham was born and went to school in Southend. He then went north to study politics and philosophy at Sheffield University (1968-71). After a year in Lebanon that established a strong commitment to the Palestinian struggle, Graham took a post-16 teacher training course at Garnett College, London. He taught at Kingsway Princeton College, and then in the late 70s joined Centreprise in Hackney, a bookshop and vibrant neighbourhood centre, as a community worker.

Graham returned to Sheffield to work for the local adult education service, initially on the Parson Cross estate where educational capital was low. He worked alongside colleagues to shape provision to meet local needs.

In the early 1980s, Sheffield City Council, in conjunction with the trades unions, initiated a pioneering scheme enabling council employees to take a course of education during work time without loss of pay (Paid Educational Leave). Four tutors were seconded from the adult education service in 1983 to work on the scheme. Graham became team leader. The aim of what became known as 'Take Ten' was to foster collective learning, starting from and valuing workers' own experiences. The programme was committed to a working-class standpoint and collective values such as mutual self help and

solidarity. But it also sought to foster a wider political perspective including tackling racism and sexism. Low grade manual, craft and clerical workers could take a ten-day course. There was a full day course for men and women, and a women only course (taught by women tutors) aimed at part-time workers (1).

Graham as team leader was a Lecturer 2; the other tutors were L1s. But in a move typical of the way he lived out his politics, he rejected the hierarchy implied by the job title and informally shared the difference in his salary among other members of the team.

Gently but firmly, and with a great sense of humour, he encouraged participants to develop their own interests and potential. No single course was the same and a large part of the content was decided upon in discussion with course members. The pedagogy was progressive. Small groups of manual and clerical workers shared the intimate details of their jobs through carefully scaffolded discussion using their own photographic accounts of day-to-day work. Workers' writing of various kinds emerged from this foundation. Given time to reflect on the part each individual played in servicing the city, the aim was to encourage a sense of mutual respect and solidarity (2). Once the issues course members were most interested in were established, a lot of the team's work was to arrange for groups to meet with experts. Each cohort was also offered an optional study weekend away at the local trade union sponsored Northern College (3).

Drawing from his time at Centreprise and his deep interest in the power of education to bring about



Above: 'Take Ten' students and tutors in 1987. Graham Birkin is standing 4th from left, with a mug of tea. Another tutor, Maggie Norton, is in the middle row, sitting, first on the left.

social change, Graham had a clear, radical vision of what was possible to do working with low-paid city council workers. He led the project with skill and lots of humour. We all learned how to push learning to the limits, taking trips across the city, across the country and even to Europe. Graham showed how we could generate the curriculum from the needs, interests and lives of the groups of workers we were privileged to work with.

Barbara Barnsley, a former Take Ten student and creche worker, remembers Graham as someone ' . . . who always had a smile, always put you at your ease, and you learned a lot because you listened to what he had to say.'

After Take Ten, Graham worked on the CICERO project, coordinated by Ted Hartley, the WEA district secretary for Yorkshire South. Ted told us:

CICERO was an EU-funded project that promoted citizenship education in areas where large-scale funding had been deployed. South Yorkshire was the centre, with partner hubs in Liverpool, the North East, South Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Graham was the driving force behind the development of an imaginative and innovative learning programme that drew on community initiatives and visits to other EU-funded areas of the UK in order to share ideas. Another feature of this programme was the study visits to Brussels and

Strasbourg, which involved MEPs and key officials in the European Commission. Graham made it work and the enthusiasm and enjoyment of the people involved was fine testament to his gifts as an adult educator. Additionally, Graham was a key member of the trans-European citizenship project with partners in Malta, Spain and Lithuania. Again, he and the other colleagues involved made it a great success. In a similar manner he threw himself into the Active Learning for Active Citizenship project, funded through the Home Office. Graham was meticulous in his research, brilliant in his teaching and a lovely guy to work alongside.

Graham also worked as a WEA tutor. Retired Tutor/Organiser for Sheffield, Jol Miskin, remembers Graham as:

an independently-minded socialist . . . with a touch of anarchism in him, but crucially a free thinker. He was a dedicated anti-racist, welcoming refugees and asylum seekers into his house to live and to share. He was an adult educator second to none. He'd carry newspaper cuttings, books and all sorts of learning resources - maps, magazines, photos etc - into the classroom and always worked from the premise that his students had as much to contribute to the collective learning as did he. He was always on the lookout for innovative ways of teaching and learning.

Jol recalled a class that was typical of Graham's resourcefulness as an adult educator:

Working with a diverse group of adults at a Sheffield community centre: men, women, black and white, British and refugees from different parts of the world. In a discussion exploring identity, place and culture Graham asked participants to talk about their memories of bread in their country of origin or from their youth. Students recalled smells, places, mothers baking. It was peculiarly moving and quite emotional.

Masoba Kromah is a resettled refugee who came to Sheffield from Liberia. She met Graham through a recommendation from her caseworker, who suggested attending adult learning classes for newly arrived refugees in 2004. Masoba recalls Graham's classes in Sheffield:

Graham tried to listen to all [of us] and make sense of our complex life stories. While teaching us about the UK he also wanted to understand our needs and the link between life in UK and Liberia. When he found out that we had problems with the document given to us by the Home Office, he took us to the local MP. After visiting the MP's office and with support from our caseworkers, the issue was resolved. Graham organised trips for course members, including to the G8 meeting in Edinburgh, Westminster, and to Liverpool Slavery Museum. These were vital in assisting our integration, as we were new to the country.

As well as the Take Ten programme, Graham taught a variety of other courses open to the public. These continued after the demise of the Paid Educational Leave scheme. The courses were popular with those who had learned to trust in the open and welcoming style that characterised the experiences Graham generated. John Mortimer, then a community worker in Sheffield, recalls:

Graham ran a short course on the first Gulf War, held in the Town Hall. I then did a course with him on the structure of the city council - so much flowed from that for me and I owe Graham and Take 10 so much, . . . [learning] about social, economic and political issues, community groups, how local government and public agencies work. Just as important as any knowledge was meeting lots of people, sharing ideas and getting motivation and confidence - Graham was really good at helping people in that way and I definitely gained a lot from going to those courses with him.

Opportunities to take the kinds of courses Graham taught on have been heavily cut back over the last ten years. But at the same time, there has been a renewed interest in political education, for example in the environmental movement and initiatives like *The World Transformed*. Graham's ideas and practice seem as relevant as ever.

Graham suffered a serious stroke and developed dementia. He tried, however, to remain active and took part in a Palestinian fundraising event in his local park just two weeks before he died. A family memorial event was held in July, but because of Covid numbers were limited. A bigger celebration of Graham's life is planned for Sheffield in 2021.

Notes

1. The women's course lasted a half day and ran over 15 weeks.
2. For a further discussion of the approaches used, see the chapter on the Sheffield Paid Educational Leave scheme in Jane Mace and Martin Yarnit (eds) *Time Off to Learn* (Methuen 1987).

See also Fiona Frank (ed.) 'Not just a number - experiences of workplace learning', Lancaster University, 1992, https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/33294/2/Not_Just_a_Number_Experiences_of_workplace_learning.pdf
3. After Sheffield reorganised its post-16 education, the Take Ten team was moved into the Sheffield College in 1989. The link with Northern College, however, continued.