

Critical thinking for critical times

Sharon Clancy looks at lessons from the history of the 1919 Adult Education Report and from the report marking its centenary

Consensus about what constitutes adult education has always been difficult to achieve. The arguments about its purpose are long standing: whether it is about a social justice function, providing second chance education for those who have been failed by the mainstream education system; creating functioning and responsible citizens; preparing us for employment or to maintain our skills in work; or is a mechanism for enriching our leisure time. Crucially, historically, it has also provided an important means of developing public political and critical consciousness, enabling a deeper understanding of our individual and societal context and encouraging us to question established hierarchies, prevailing policies and ideologies. It is, arguably, a vital tool in a functioning democracy.

Two reports, spanning 100 years, have scrutinised, questioned and focused attention on the role of adult education, the seminal 1919 Report on Adult Education, produced by the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee (AEC) (1917-19), and the Centenary Commission report on Adult Education (1), published on November 18th 2019. Both have brought together a group of thinkers - from industry, education, the unions and the voluntary sector - to reflect on what value adult education can have in our lives, particularly at times of crisis and change when our motivation to learn beyond compulsory schooling years is even more crucial.

The AEC's Final Report in 1919 concluded that adult education should be conceived as 'a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship' which 'should be both universal and lifelong' and 'should be spread uniformly and systematically over the whole community'. The ambition was to support community-led, democratically-oriented forms of education, in an effort to oversee rebuilding 'the national life on a better and more durable foundation'. This was at a critical national juncture, following the devastation of the Great War and seismic social change - the extension of the franchise, the need for revised industrial and occupational structures, and the growth in emerging social movements.

For the AEC, 'Humane' adult education, defined as life-enhancing learning through the arts, music, crafts and literature to meet the human need for personal development and self-expression - 'the satisfaction of intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual needs' (1 54, 1919 Report) - was central. But so too was 'Civic' education. This was education conceived through a lens of collectivism and social responsibility which focused on the importance of social movements to effect change, particularly for working-class people, at a time when newly enfranchised working-class men:

demand opportunities for education in the hope that the power which it brings will enable them to understand and help in the solution of the common problems of society. In many cases, therefore, their efforts to obtain education are specifically directed towards rendering themselves better fitted for the responsibilities of membership in political, social and industrial organisations' (1 54).

The Final Report was bold in its assertions about political tensions, about industrial conditions and about the respective roles of the state and the voluntary sector in providing education for adults. As Arthur Greenwood wrote, the Report's 'main argument' was that 'responsible citizenship' would be 'impossible so long as the industrial and social conditions prevailing before the war remain' (quoted in Goldman, 1995, p205 [2]). 'Notes on Industry and Education' (3), the most hard hitting and contentious of the individual reports which informed the Final Report, started out with a damning indictment of 'degrading' work conditions and a school system which pursued a slavish devotion to a cold, bookish intellectualism which made little attempt to engage with an individual's real world interests, their 'lived experience', the realm of the imagination or the human desire to make, shape and craft things: 'the work has not become part of his real life' (p5). Democracy, the AEC argued, meant ensuring voluntary agencies and the social movements were central in shaping and delivering adult education. The view was that the state tended to support the status quo and

was primarily interested in the vocational, and the 1919 AEC doubted that Local Authorities would 'take bold steps for the provision of non-vocational subjects' (paragraph 194). The Report also called for the need to seek out new pedagogical approaches which engaged the adult, recognising that this must address specifically both adult learning needs and approaches. The importance of non-vocational education beyond the perspective of adults as merely work units was emphasised:

The value of adult education is not solely to be measured by increases in earning power or productive capacity or by any other materialistic yardstick, but by the quality of life it inspires in the individual and generates for the community at large

However, it was clear from the response to Notes on Industry and Education that adult education which set about questioning the establishment was troubling for many in power. The Final Report asserted that, too often, state-led adult education avoided the 'controversial' and was ideologically opposed to critique - one telling quote emphasises this point:

It is within our knowledge that there are even today town councillors to whom the term 'economics' is synonymous with 'socialism'. The majority of those who desire to study do so probably because of the interest they have already taken in industrial or other public affairs [trade unionists] . . . This is presumably the basis for the charge sometimes made by Local Authorities and even by some members of universities, that the classes 'encourage discontent and socialism' (1919 Report, pp206-7).

Such tensions remain in the present day. It is noteworthy that since the 1980s, despite rhetoric about 'lifelong learning' for a 'learning society', opportunities for, and institutions of, formal adult education have been largely swept away and what remains, with few exceptions, focuses on training young adults in workplace skills. Wider questions about education which serves a genuine, inclusive and participatory democracy have been put aside.

The Centenary Commission Report on Adult Education brings back attention to what has happened in education across the board. It counters the notion that the massification of education has rendered adult education unnecessary. In the last 10 years, participation rates in adult learning and education have fallen catastrophically at all levels of education and across the entire UK: with ongoing decline in government-funded part-time educational provision, fewer opportunities are available in particular for the most disadvantaged adults. Levels of participation in lifelong learning are profoundly unequal among different

groups in society - and the most economically and socially disadvantaged people are most severely affected. While 46 per cent of those who had left full-time education at the age of 21 were still participating in learning, only 21 per cent of those who left school at 16 or earlier said they were engaged in learning (4).

The Centenary Report calls for additional funding for adult community education services and Further Education Colleges (an increase of £1bn pa) and asks that the funding be rebalanced towards those who have previously missed out. It also argues for an Adult Education and Lifelong Learning Strategy, localised plans and a designated Minister, with a view that adult education needs to be institutionalised as part of state planning at infrastructure level. The marketisation of education, evidenced in increasing precarity for frontline teaching and support staff in Further and Higher Education, makes local accountability increasingly important as a counter to the march of the neoliberal agenda. Trust in FE and HE management is at an all-time low and inflated pay for principals has become a national issue. An article from the *TES* in 2017 (5) indicated that, according to data from the Education and Skills Funding Agency, 12 FE colleges paid their leaders £200,000 or more - up by 50 per cent from the previous year. The 2019 Report calls for FE colleges to strengthen their democratic accountability to their local communities, by ensuring representation on their Boards from the local authority, community organisations and trades unions.

In the absence of genuine political debate about the future of education within the establishment, the 2019 Report offers a renewed argument for grassroots, informal education and community activism, and horizontal movements' connected to important societal issues (such as climate collapse, gender politics, economic breakdown and inequality and industry, big business capitalism) as new sources of spontaneous and responsive learning. The Report takes its cue from the original 1919 Report and makes important points about life-wide education, the need for collective learning and the importance of civil society. It argues for grassroots activism, not charity, and eschews a philanthropic approach to community building:

It means facilitating citizens - of all backgrounds, identities and perspectives - to contribute to constructive and critical democratic discussion. In this way, adult learning can strengthen citizenship, and support communities and organisations in addressing the great issues of our time (Centenary Commission Report, p26).

An interviewee for the Centenary Commission Report, Neil Griffiths, Director and campaigner for Arts Emergency, expressed some of the preconditions of meaningful activism and education which develops

critical skills to explore what a democracy should look like, arguing that much of what we have now fails to deliver:

It's what type of education people have a right to, and what type of education is enshrined in European human rights. It's implied that it's the kind of education that makes you a functioning democratic citizen in some ways. It implies developing critical skills, and class function and historical knowledge, but . . . education doesn't really seem to mean that anymore.

Instead we have seen a growth in demagoguery, witnessing an unprecedented avalanche of misinformation, disinformation and fake news and a paucity of reasoned analysis from the establishment, if not outright bias. We have entered the age of anti-intellectualism, a mistrust of academics, thinkers and experts which has created a critical thinking void into which the mantras of neoliberalism can pour. As Chomsky stated in 1995, 'there's a huge gap that once was at least partially filled by left intellectuals willing to engage with the general public and their problems' (Noam Chomsky [6]).

The 2019 Centenary Report has emerged at a time when fears of collectivism (equated to socialism, rebranded in popular parlance as communism) are at their height, as evidenced in the UK General Election (December 12th, 2019). Many grassroots organisations are critically endangered financially, and especially those espousing unpopular causes. All of these are real tensions and the relationship between the role of the state and the voluntary sector is again at the heart of the 2019 report, particularly at a time when swathes of the contemporary voluntary sector could be seen as largely toothless, presiding over a rise in charity, philanthropy and hollow virtue-signalling instead of collective action. For many people, we are living in a value interregnum in which all externally given value systems have proven failures (political, economic, religious, philanthropic etc). This, as we have seen, is profoundly dangerous.

However, the current Covid-19 pandemic is forcing some important reappraisals upon us. As we self-isolate, the connections we value, the world of family, friends and mutual aid, become ever more important. Online learning of all kinds is booming as people seek to engage with others through the virtual world. The people who have been badged as unimportant or dispensable by government after government - the support workers, the hourly paid teachers, the care staff - are emerging as keyworkers fundamental to societal functioning. The dominant systems of neoliberalism and the business models of educational marketisation are ruptured as students are sent home, enrolments are paused and student recruitment is in serious jeopardy. We need to rethink our institutional

and societal models as they are shown wanting and look to an adult education which is dialogic and participatory. As Raymond Williams said, adult education has to be more than 'the bottle with the message in it, bobbing on the tides and waves of history' (Williams, 1983, in McIlroy and Westwood [Eds], 1993, p.255 [7]), but must spring, instead from the 'desire to make learning part of the process of social change itself' (ibid, p257). We must refocus on the primacy of the 'lived experience' of the individual learner, the alternative vision of radical, informal education which is about individual and cultural transformation, in line with Williams's life-long social project, the creation of 'an educated and participating democracy' (Williams, 1961, reprinted 2001, p389 [8]). The Centenary Commission Report allows us to recalibrate and reinvigorate the longer term purpose of adult education as part of the 'long revolution'.

1. *The 1919 Report: The final and interim reports of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction 1918-1919*, Ministry of Reconstruction, Adult Education Committee, Great Britain. Publisher: Nottingham: Department of Adult Education, University of Nottingham, 1980.

A Permanent National Necessity. Adult Education and Lifelong Learning for 21st Century Britain, published November 2019 by School of Education, University of Nottingham.

2. Goldman, L. (1995) *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Education since 1850*. OUP.

3. 'Notes on Industry and Education', by James Morton.

4. AoC College Key Facts - 2018/19 <https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Key%20Facts%202018-19.pdf>

5. TES, 28th April 2017 Julia Belgutay, Will Martin and Stephen Exley, Colleges spend more on principal pay while staff face pay freeze - College chief pay rises an 'embarrassment for the sector'.

6. The discussion in which Chomsky expressed this view took place on LBBS, Z-Magazine's Left On-Line Bulletin Board in 1995.

7. Raymond Williams, 'Adult Education and Social Change', from *Adult Education and Social Change: Lectures and Reminiscences in Honour of Tony McLean*, WEA Southern District, 1983, pp9-24, reproduced in McIlroy, J. and Westwood, S. (eds), (1993) *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education*. London: NIACE, pp255-264.

8. Williams, R. (1961/2011), *The Long Revolution*. Swansea: Parthian Books.