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Credit Where Credit is Due in Non-Credit Adult Education

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Introduction

The author sings the praises of non-credit adult education, and enlists a number of philosophers to help in the chorus. He examines the motives people might have for enrolling in non-credit courses, and makes the following claims: that good non-credit adult education can give us a purpose, provide some order in our unpredictable lives, encourage us to reason freely, nurture our consciousness, foster a civil society, protect valuable elements of our lifeworld, and teach us to assert ourselves.

The canteen

From my first encounter with it, I have been an admirer of good old-fashioned, non-credit adult education. My friend, David Head, an English educator, used to call it "familiar adult education". You know the sort of thing: evening classes (though some might well be in the day) in keep fit, Mandarin for beginners, quality cooking on a budget, German cinema, Chicago blues, the Brontes, public speaking, learning to draw with pencil and charcoal...

I was in England in the 1960s, and needed a job. I had done a stint of teaching English as a second language, and so I wrote offering my services to a number of educational institutions listed in a local government guide. I got a reply from an inner city adult education institute, offering me a class on Tuesday evenings called "Writing for pleasure" (not English as a second language at all). I accepted, and turned up at the appointed time at the address given in the letter—a secondary school by day and a branch of the adult education institute by night. Someone called a tutor-in-charge showed me to a classroom where sixteen people sat patiently waiting. I had prepared nothing and am not sure how I survived, but I did, and we established a pattern of

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activities—critiquing our writings and swapping tips—that took us through the thirty-odd weekly meetings that made up the year.

All the classes met from 7.00 to 9.00 and, this being England, at ten minutes to eight everyone went to the school canteen for a cup of tea. The canteen was large, and there were some 200 people from all but the most exalted social strata, wearing office and casual clothes, leotards (keep fit), the odd velvet jacket and string of multi-coloured beads (the 1960s, remember), overalls (car maintenance), and whites (badminton for beginners). The sight of the canteen thrilled me. All these people were ready to come to an unprepossessing school building in order to learn. And I was quickly captivated by what went on in my classroom. I loved the buzz and the hum of it. I loved the smiles, and the frowns of concentration, and the unpressured, thoughtful conversation.

I found more work with the institute and two years later was appointed to my first full-time job in the world of adult education. My brief was to bring in "non-users", and as long as people turned up, I had a virtual *carte blanche* to set up courses on anything I liked. And I did: on rock music, black power, alternative societies, women's liberation, our planet, language and linguistics, welfare rights, the literature of science fiction …

Research

Over the years, I have encountered people who look down on the world I have just described. This kind of adult education, they say, is to do with hobbies and pastimes, and is unimportant. But they are wrong, and I want to examine why.

In the mid-1970s and still in England, I came across a small but thought-provoking piece of research conducted by a French teacher called Joelle Battestini (a Corsican name). The original paper has been lost, but I did report the research in a booklet some years later (1986, pp. 13-15), and the quotes that follow come from there.

It is commonly said that adults enrol in non-credit classes to learn for learning's sake, but Battestini felt the explanation was simplistic, and she set out to uncover more about the motives of the students attending two of her classes. Her approach was

straightforward. She asked the members of the classes—about thirty people in all—the same question over and over again. "Why do you come to this class?" She did this by distributing a short questionnaire, putting the question to both classes orally, asking her students to interview each other in pairs, organising two group discussions, and interviewing a number of individual students on videotape.

Not surprisingly she found that the answers differed significantly, and she divided these into two categories of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motives are directly related to the subject being studied. So, the first time she asked her students why they attended her course, she received these kinds of reply:

> To learn French. (One can imagine one or two students muttering "obviously", or worse, under their breath.)
> I would like to have French as a second language.
> I want to speak French fluently.

But things are not as simple as that, and other explanations emerged:

> I would like to continue my education in France.
> Mainly for travel, reading French literature and seeing films.
> To understand international phone calls I receive at work.

These motives are still associated with the subject of French and so can be classified as intrinsic, but they contain other elements related to education, leisure and work.

The research was designed to press the students further, and they began revealing extrinsic motives, that is, motives that were no longer so easily related to the subject. Battestini broke these extrinsic motives into four sub-categories.

Some students attended for *intellectual stimulation*:

> To be extended mentally.

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> I want the opportunity to discuss with people whose French is the same standard as mine a variety of subjects and situations.

Some attended for *social stimulation*:

> I expect friendship.
> The pleasure of meeting people of different backgrounds and interests.

Some attended for *relaxation*:

> I expect to relax, laugh a little.
> I enjoy studying something wholly unconnected with my work.

And at least one person came to *escape*. She put it, starkly, like this:

> Because I want to forget about the terrible day at the office today and that I'll have to get up tomorrow morning.

There were too few students to allow for conclusions that could be applied beyond the two classes involved in the research. But I am not after proof of a scientistic kind. And if I am shamelessly tugging at your heart-strings by placing the office worker's response last (and returning to it regularly), so be it. I take comfort from Jane Thompson (2000) who compares "common sense" knowledge with "expert" and "educated" knowledge; and argues that common sense knowledge is replete with subjective and affective realities that carry their own validity (pp. 2, 129). There is the ring of down-to-earth truth in all of the replies I have quoted above, and an aching distress in the office worker's response.

Finding direction, making meaning

Qualitative research involves interpretation and that can tip over into speculation. I want to indulge myself in both these activities and, in the process, make a number of claims for the non-credit adult education I have described above.

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I believe that the office worker was confronting a joyless existence and finding some respite, and even the glimmering of some kind of meaning, in an adult education class in French. Albert Camus writes about the meaning or, rather, the *meaninglessness*, of life, in his discussions of the Absurd. There is nothing to believe in, he says, no ultimate truth, no deity or set of absolute principles to give us direction, yet we behave as if there were. Absurd though it is, we spend our lives giving meaning to a meaningless existence. The Absurd, Camus tells us, "is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (1942/2000, p 32). We shout into the void and, driven by the lack of response, go on shouting.

At first glance Camus' theory of the Absurd may seem defeatist. If life has no meaning, why get out of bed? But the opposite is the case. If there is no ultimate power to give us direction, then we will have to find that direction ourselves. We can make our own meaning. With the Absurd comes an exhilarating freedom.

But things are not so simple. The freedom is a potential one, and it is often easier to take directions from others, to fall into routines, and do nothing. We want to act in a more pleasurable, worthy, challenging, productive or satisfying way, but we are unsure of what we actually want to *do*. Like Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1965), we are free to act, but we do not. The exhilaration dissipates, to be replaced by an existential angst.

Claim one: Purpose

This brings me to my first claim for non-credit adult education. Good adult education (and *good* in this context will take on meaning as this article progresses) can assuage that angst, and give us a purpose.

Learning involves change in the person of the learner. We gain new knowledge, and so from non-knower become knower. We develop new skills, and so from non-doer become doer. And we encounter new ideas, take the tenable ones on as our own, and so become people who think for ourselves. Many adult learners return to class with a

mixture of anticipation and apprehension. However, as we settle in and acquire new knowledge, skills and ideas, the apprehension fades. Increasingly we take control of our own learning and set our own directions. What was a collection of poorly defined extrinsic motives gives way to an intrinsic one. What was a casual interest transmogrifies into a singular purpose.

The scale of things in adult education might be small, but not always. Although my claim may seem preposterous, it is just possible that an adult education class gave that office worker a reason to live.

Dealing with unpredictability and causelessness

Camus worked at the meeting point between literature and philosophy, and the influence of his thinking can be found in both fields. In 1942 he published a study of the Absurd in the form of a novel called *L'Etranger* (translated as *The Outsider* or *The Stranger*). The main character, Meursault, is indifferent to everything and everyone, including, it would seem, himself and his own fate. There is no reason for the murder he suddenly commits apart, perhaps, from the heat of the sun on the Algerian beach where it happens.

In literary terms we would describe Meursault as an anti-hero, albeit a deeply disturbing one. In him, Camus anticipates the raucous collection of anti-heroes that populate a lot of English language novels written in the twenty-five years after the Second World War. There are strong echoes of Camus' Absurd, for example, in the unpredictability that prevails in Kingsley Amis' sharply satirical novel *Lucky Jim* (1954).

Jim Dixon is on a local English bus, desperate to get to the station before the train carries the woman he loves away. The bus is agonisingly slow, falling in behind farm machinery and trucks. Elderly passengers mount and alight, taking their time, calling out to the driver to wait. Jim grows ever more frantic.

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> What actually would be next: a masked hold up, a smash, floods, a burst tyre, an electric storm with falling trees and meteorites, a diversion, a low-level attack by Communist aircraft, sheep, the driver stung by a hornet? (p. 245)

Jim arrives too late but, with wonderful unpredictability, so does the woman he loves. In an absurd anti-climax, they meet at the station *after* the train has gone.

There are strong echoes of Camus' Absurd in the causelessness that prevails in Kurt Vonnegut's anarchic novel *Slaughterhouse Five* (Vonnegut, 1969/1979). Events happen without explanation or justification. Some people die, others survive. Billy Pilgrim is kidnapped by aliens. Dresden is bombed into near oblivion although it is of no strategic importance, has no industry of any significance, and few defences …

But Jim Dixon and Billy Pilgrim persevere. If there is no reason to life, then everything depends on them. In this sense, all human beings are privileged. We are buffeted by the wind blowing from our futures (Camus, 1942/54, p. 153). Disaster can overtake us, but, equally, we may prosper.

Claim two: Order

This brings me to my second claim. Good adult education offers us a precious moment of order as a respite from the unpredictability and causelessness that can buffet us in our everyday lives.

In his classic text on curriculum design Ralph Tyler (1949) argues that learning should be ordered to meet the criteria of continuity, sequence and integration. We can achieve continuity through the reiteration of major elements in the curriculum; sequence by making each experience take the learners to a higher level of understanding; and integration by ensuring that the program has an internal coherence, and is integrated into the lives of the learners.

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We do not know what made the office worker's day so terrible. However, if she were subject to workplace bullying or the vagaries of an uncaring and erratic management, then this adult education course would have provided her with a context of order in which to take refuge. More, if we assume that she was successfully learning, then just possibly that experience of week-by-week improvement was helping her persevere in an unpredictable world outside.

Longing for happiness and reason

The apparent bleakness of Camus' theory of the Absurd is misleading. There are strong emotions motivating the human search for purpose. We stand "face to face with the irrational", Camus writes, and feel within us a "longing for happiness and reason" (2000, p. 31). Camus' ideas fell into disfavour for some years after his death in 1960, but his influence in philosophical thinking in the second half of the last century is there. His explication of the Absurd anticipates some of the paradoxical writings of the "postmodernists"; and I can find echoes in critical theorist Jurgen Habermas' (1968/1987a) ideas on knowledge and human interests.

Habermas argues that we generate knowledge to meet three "human interests". We have an interest in controlling our material world, and so we generate instrumental knowledge. We have an interest in managing our social world, and so we generate interpretive knowledge. He calls these two "knowledge constitutive interests." And he identifies a third human interest that leads us to generate critical knowledge. This he describes as an "emancipatory cognitive interest", and he links it with our desire for "autonomy and responsibility" and our "will to reason freely (1987a, pp. 197-198).

In Habermas' "emancipatory cognitive interest" we can see a more cerebral form of Camus' longing for reason. In his "autonomy and responsibility", we can see the responsibility to find our own direction that Camus' concept of the Absurd thrusts upon us. And in Habermas' ideas on emancipation and "the will to reason freely" we can see something of Camus' inspired linking of happiness with reason.

Claim three: Reason

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This brings me to my third claim. Good adult education provides us with an opportunity to reason freely. Freed from the constraints of formal assessment, we can set our own goals and work at our own pace. Experienced adult educators know this. They design flexible curricula, use methods that challenge us to think in imaginative ways, and encourage us to take responsibility for the way we learn.

Clearly there is pleasure to be had from learning in which we reason freely. But on occasions the experience has been misrepresented by the use of the word *fun*. Learning can require hard work. And what we learn from this hard work can confront us. Camus is talking of something well beyond fun when he associates reason with happiness. To unfetter our minds and take an argument to its conclusion can bring us to a state of deep satisfaction, a metaphysical repose, which may not be fun, but which we can legitimately describe as happiness.

I like to think that the class in French gave the office worker hope. I imagine her "terrible day at the office" had little that was positive to engage her, and required little or no use of her intellect. However, here in her evening class, removed from the pain of her work, she could reason freely, and glimpse the possibility of happiness.

Reaching out

I have always been sceptical of the idea that we are born with some internal essence that is the source of our consciousness. I much prefer the existentialists' view that existence comes first, and meaning second. As Jean-Paul Sartre would have it, we encounter ourselves as we surge up into the world—and we define ourselves *afterwards* (1946/1989, p. 349). I see evidence of this in the progress of a baby. As it responds to a caress, as it reaches out to grasp an adult's extended finger, as it begins interacting with the people and objects around it, so it becomes aware.

In Marxian terms, we generate our consciousness in a *dialectical relationship* between the self and our social and material world. Dialectical relationships contain a paradox. The objects of our thought are simultaneously in opposition to, and reliant on, each other. In the case of the self in relationship to our world, we are utterly alone, and yet

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our existence as a conscious being depends on our relationship with others. We are trapped inside our own awareness, and can only ever communicate imperfectly with the world outside, but we go on trying to reach out, to touch and be touched, to understand and be understood.

Dialectical relationships create their own "universe". Each object of thought "reflects" the other and, like an image in a mirror, cannot exist without the object it is reflecting. Without the self to interpret it, the world has no meaning, and without the world, the self ceases to exist.

And dialectical relationships do not carry a single truth. They vary according to the factors that mediate them. We can examine how the encounter of the self with the world is mediated by language, or work, or desire, or culture … Nor do we tie down the concepts of the self and the world in definitions. We let them "float", changing in meaning as the factors mediating their encounter change. So in some cases we see the self as a thinking, free-willed individual, or a cog in the economy, or the product of a social class … and the world as our immediate family and friends, or the past, or the global environment … In this way we open our minds to multiple interpretations, new ways of understanding, and the likelihood of insight.

It is in this contradictory, interdependent, ever-shifting encounter of the self with our social and material world that we create the way we think, feel, and act.

Claim four: Consciousness

This brings me to my fourth claim. By taking part in good adult education, we sustain and develop our consciousness.

We engage with our social world. Because the class is non-credit, there is little or no counterproductive competition, and teachers and learners can make extensive use of

activities that promote genial disagreement and convivial collaboration. Learning throws people together. People share insights.

We engage with our material world. We run our hand lovingly along a newly planed piece of timber in a carpentry class. We come to grips, literally, with the metal hoop or the trapeze and develop a visceral feel for space and height in a circus skills class. We make a foil the deft extension of our body and mind in a fencing class.

And we engage with the social and material world in the abstract. In classes on psychology, sociology, history, and politics, we can formulate theories about the encounter of the self with the world. And in classes on literature, music and art, we can revel in the achievements of human consciousness that have come about as a result of that encounter.

When good adult education is taking place, learners and teachers engage in a creative exchange, which Paulo Freire (1972) calls *dialogic* education. In everyday communication we move from question to answer, and the person asking the question does the learning. But the learning can be limited. Answers normally come in the form of statements, and statements can be static, definitive, and lock us into an unthinking acceptance of the present.

In dialogic education, however, we move from question to question, and are interested in the answers only in so far as they lead to more interesting questions. We hone our curiosity, and develop a state of critical consciousness. We question established ways of thinking and acting, and redefine the world in terms of challenges. Freire calls this generative kind of inquiry "problematising." As Sartre would have it, we project ourselves towards a future—and know we are doing so. We *choose* what we are (1989, p. 349).

At the time of her research, Battestini was using a new method of teaching French, which had been developed in response to a Council of Europe report called *The Threshold Level* (van Ek, 1975). The method abandoned the "logic" of grammar, and

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adopted the "logic" of functions and notions. In essence this was a move from instruction to dialogue. If we follow the logic of grammar, we start learning a language with the simplest grammatical structure, which is often the statement. *The woman pats the dog*. But if we follow the logic of notions and functions, we begin with the socio-linguistic needs of a newcomer to the language. These might well be performing the function of getting directions, and expressing the notion of politeness. *Could you help me, please? I need to find this address. Thank you. You have been very kind.* The prime objective of this new method was not to master grammatical constructions, but to communicate successfully. And successful communication was judged not on the ease of expression but on whether the problem was resolved. From the very first lesson, learners were placed in pairs or groups, given a linguistic structure and some basic vocabulary, set a problem, and encouraged to communicate … in French.

How did that the office worker come to say what she said? The sentiment may have been grim, but she had seen her situation for what it was. I like to think that the French class provided her with a heightened intellectual and physical encounter with her social and material world, and had drawn her into a process of generative inquiry. I like to think that for the two hours of the class each week (at the very least) she felt intensely engaged—and intensely conscious.

Enriching our lives

When the Berlin wall was pulled down in 1989 and, along with it, the communist regimes in the eastern bloc, the right wing pundits declared socialism a failure. Of course, we can challenge this assertion. The countries that were labelled socialist were travesties of socialism, and their demise proved nothing. But it is undeniable that some social theorists went looking for a different terminology. The term *community* had enjoyed its time in the sun during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and for many had proven ill-defined; and so in the 1990s a number of social theorists turned (or returned) to the concepts of civil society and social capital.

We can give a meaning to the phrase *civil society* by starting with the words themselves. *Civil* society is that part of our social world in which we are respectful of

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others, and in which we cooperate rather than compete. Civil *society* fills the gap left by government, the law, the market, and prescriptive fundamentalist religions. *Civil society* is made up of that multitude of egalitarian, voluntary associations in which we can engage with others and enrich our lives.

Civil society associations take different forms. They may be a formal entity with a defined membership and a constitution, as in the case of a local dramatic society or a sports club. They may not be a formal entity, but still have a defined membership, as in the case of a car pool. They may be an ever-changing gathering of people, as in the case of a number of friends, and anyone else really, who meet in the park on Saturday mornings to kick a football around. And they may consist of little more than understandings between individuals. You and I might take turns dropping in on an elderly neighbour and, by virtue of doing so, enter into an undertaking to continue doing so.

Civil society associations perform different functions. A residents action group provides an alternative means of representation. A reading group at a local library provides a regular pastime. A Facebook user group provides a context for social contact and interaction.

The value civil society can be described as "social capital". And the measure of social capital is trust. Eva Cox (1995, pp. 15-17) describes four kinds of capital: financial, in the form of money and property; physical, in the form of the environment; human, in the form of people's skills and knowledge; and social, in the form of accumulated trust. If we over-exploit the first three, the stocks are depleted. Money is lost, forests are denuded, people suffer burnout. However, in the case of social capital, the more we spend, the more there is. If I rely on you to call in on that elderly neighbour, and you do, then my trust in you is enhanced. And if I keep to my side of the bargain, your trust in me is enhanced.

Claim five: Civil society

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This brings me to my fifth claim. Good non-credit adult education contributes to the maintenance and development of a civil society. Classes are exemplars of civil society associations. They are egalitarian, voluntary groupings of people who collaborate in pursuit of common interests. Freed from competition, we can trust each other.

Again it is pure speculation, but let us picture that office worker on her first evening in the French class. She was timid, and closed in on herself. Before she had time to demur, she was paired off with another member of the group, and encouraged to speak in French. She went to the tea break in the company of that other person. Now she had an ally. In the second half of the evening, she was asked to join in a group of four, and take part in another exercise. More of this kind of collaboration followed in the subsequent meetings, and gradually she got to know everyone by name. This being England, after the fourth meeting, someone suggested that they might all go to a pub after class …

Struggling for a decent world

Michael Welton (1995) gives civil society a central role in what he sees as a major struggle for a decent world. He uses Habermas' (1981/1987b) concepts of the system and the lifeworld. The system denotes a combination of the processes of exchange, and the processes of political, administrative and legal control. In short, the system is made up of money and power.

The lifeworld denotes that almost infinite number of taken-for-granted understandings upon which we construct our social lives. We simply know how close or how far to stand from the other person when in conversation with a friend, a member of the family, or a stranger. We move, as it were instinctively, to help an elderly person who stumbles in the street.

Habermas (1987b, pp. 153-155) argues that in tribal societies of the past there was a high degree of correspondence between the lifeworld and the system. What people intuitively believed, how they communicated, how they exchanged goods and services, and how they organised themselves coincided. Habermas admits that his vision may be

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idealised, but goes on to say that in such a society we can postulate a collective consciousness.

In modern societies, however, the system is "uncoupled" from the lifeworld. The economy and the power structures become alienated from the values upon which we base our everyday existence. Worse, the dehumanised values of the system begin distorting the values of the lifeworld. We find ourselves submitting to the enticements of advertising, and vying rather than cooperating with our neighbours. We are fearful of legal entanglements and do not move so spontaneously to help a stranger in distress. The system "colonises" the lifeworld, and the collective nature of everyday life is weakened.

Strengthen civil society, Welton (1995) argues, and we protect the lifeworld against the dehumanising influences of the system. We resist the colonisation.

Claim Six: The lifeworld

This brings me to my sixth claim. Good adult education can protect valuable elements of our lifeworld.

There is a radical strand to the history of adult education. From, say, the Methodist discussion groups in England in the late eighteenth century onwards, people have gathered together to learn, both for their personal benefit, and in order to make their social world more equitable. We can see this tradition continuing in the struggle by trade unionists, radicals, Chartists, and other activists to establish "an independent working class education" in the course of the nineteenth century. The tradition continues into the twentieth century in the work of people like Jimmy Tomkins and Moses Coady, Myles Horton, and Freire, and in movements like the BASE communities in Latin America. Radical adult education continues in the social movements of today, and has taken on a new form in the campaigns on the Internet, which are modes of protest, lobbying, education and mobilisation combined. And of

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course this potted history is a minuscule part of the story, since an incalculable number of people throughout history have used learning in their struggle to establish fairer societies.

I might be tempted to argue that only radical adult educators can take up Welton's challenge to defend the lifeworld. Certainly they have a role to play, but so does the most apolitical of adult education classes. People come *together* to learn. There is that "buzz", that "hum". Cohesion and camaraderie develop. The participants may have gathered for a variety of extrinsic motives but their motives merge into a common intrinsic one. And just occasionally this common endeavour approaches a form of collective consciousness. Entranced by the immediacy of the learning, individuals give way to the group, and the collective care and selfless cooperation that are significant elements of our lifeworld are affirmed.

If Battestini had approached the office worker individually to participate in the research, perhaps the office worker would have refused. But Battestini asked the class as a whole. The decision to participate was a collective one, and the office worker clearly felt part of that collectivity. Let me go on and suppose that, in a collective whose lifeworld included the values of care and cooperation, the office worker now felt able to speak her mind with such terrible frankness.

Enhancing diversity, protecting individual rights

I was careful to describe adult education classes as exemplars of civil society *associations*, and not exemplars of civil society, because a truly civil society is a utopian dream. No harm in that. Utopias are useful in describing ideals to strive for, and as standards against which we can measure our current condition. We can find many societies where people live in proximity to one another without rancour, and where they expect that everyone in that proximity will abide by mutually accepted laws. Not perfect civil societies, perhaps, but places where people can live out their lives in reasonable security.

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Paul Henderson and Ilona Vercseg (2010), however, bring us back to earth with accounts, from England and from middle and eastern Europe, of the breakdown of civil behaviour. They remind us "that, in extreme circumstances, civil society can deteriorate all too rapidly into civil war" (pp. 17, 18). And experience tells us that achieving a trusting society is impossible. There are always unscrupulous people who prey upon the decency of others, or unbalanced people who wreak havoc. Witness how schoolkid bullies, identity thieves, sexual predators, and the peddlers of hate and terror have misused the Internet. We need to be on guard against these kinds of people, and to temper our trust with distrust. Of course there will be occasions when we can lower our defences, but these moments of unguarded trust are likely to be when the gatherings are small and we know everyone involved.

Social cohesion on a larger scale grows difficult to achieve in the multicultural societies of today. Diversity brings enormous potential into our lives, but in times of stress can also translate into social division. In cities and towns, and even in many rural contexts, homogeneous communities, if they ever really existed, are things of the past. In these modern times there will always be strangers.

None of the above implies that we abandon the concept of the civil society, but it does suggest that we envisage a civil society that embraces those we know, welcomes the stranger, and accommodates difference and division. In this civil society we abandon the pursuit of social cohesion in the form of a common identity, and we vigorously pursue two goals. The first is to accumulate as much social capital as possible, and the second is to ensure everyone's individual rights. A civil society of this form offers us the protective, and creative, company of others, in which all of us, and this includes the stranger, can proclaim without fear what we choose to be. A civil society of this form honours the collective, and the individual within that collective, equally.

Claim seven: Assertion

And so to my seventh and final claim. Good adult education teaches assertion. From within its collective experience, we learn to develop and proclaim our individuality. Danny Wildemeersch and Ewa Kurantowicz (2011) describe adult education as

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> … a matter of creating public or worldly spaces where issues of torment can be debated, without the certainty that what we are saying is the ultimate right answer, but with the certainty that we are thus preserving the difference and keeping democracy alive (p. 130).

They are writing about an activist or public adult education but the essence of what they are saying is true for any good adult education activity. In a craft class we are encouraged to choose our own project, but to work in the company of others. In a keep fit class, we develop our own fitness, but do so as the member of a group. And in a class on a humanities subject, we are encouraged to arrive at our own judgment, and vigorously debate the merits or otherwise, of the painting, the book, the political theory, or the philosophical argument.

In the new language teaching methods of the 1970s, role-plays were a far cry from the banal scenarios—such as buying a loaf of bread, or going to the hairdresser—that were used in previous methods. These new role-plays involved conflict and emotion. So the students were required to play the parts of a mother confronting her teenage daughter who is still in bed at midday, a couple asking an uncooperative neighbour to turn his music down, and a woman telling her lover that their relationship is over and he must leave the apartment immediately. The students were required to argue, persuade, remonstrate, and assert themselves.

I have pushed the speculation about as far as I can, but here I go one last time. I like to think that, in the course of these role-plays, the office worker developed a taste for standing up to others. I like to think that the experience of her French class, and the companionship she found there, gave her the confidence to demand genuine change from her employers or, failing that, the courage to leave and go looking for a new job, a new career, and even a new meaning to her life. The latter is my preferred option**.** I like to think that the experience of that non-credit adult education class in French helped her redefine herself, and propel herself towards a future of her own making.

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Down but not out

Fast forward from the 1970s in England to the present in Australia. The principal of an adult education college in Sydney tells me that attendance in the non-credit program has fallen to crisis levels. He suspects, as I do, that people are abandoning the leisurely yet challenging process of studying a subject over a period of months in favour of the instant gratification of the Internet.

But non-credit adult education is a sturdy plant. It is a Wednesday morning and I walk into the central business district of Sydney to attend a non-credit adult education class entitled "The Schumanns and Brahms". It is housed in a building owned by the Workers' Educational Association, which provides an extensive and varied program of daytime, evening and weekend classes. The WEA is just short of a hundred years old and, throughout that time, has remained committed to providing non-credit adult education.

Because the class I am attending meets on a weekday morning, most, but not all, of the people there are retired. One is brought into the room in a wheelchair, and others from the group help her transfer to a normal chair. In the chat that precedes the class, there is some concern expressed about an absent regular, which is allayed when she walks through the door.

The teacher is witty and relaxed, and the students respond in kind. She encourages discussion, and defers easily to participants when they have obvious expertise. The sound system is first rate and the screen large, and we hear and see great musicians play. There is a keyboard to the side of the room and the teacher deftly demonstrates a ground base that Brahms is using in the next example to be played. She poses questions. Is this concerto a conversation or a battle between the soloist and the orchestra? And she fleshes out her analysis with anecdotes and information on Brahms' life and his relationship with the Schumanns. Non-credit adult education in my hometown may be down, but it is not out.

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The two hours of the class pass quickly, and I walk home through the city streets, across a park, and through the back streets of my suburb. I do not have a good musical memory. I cannot hum a melodic line back as soon as I have heard it. But emotional echoes stay with me. To end her class, the teacher played an excerpt from Brahms' "Four Serious Songs" (opus 121), and I am still moved by the soulfulness of it. I shall listen to the whole work when I get home.

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