

# Train Tracks and Tailored Learning: Is this the end of the line for government funded community education?

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## Abstract

The number of people participating in state funded ‘community learning’ has diminished over the last decade from a figure of 657,200 in 2013/14 to just 274, 090 in 2022/2023. Although there are many different interpretations of what community learning is, this article’s key concern is for learning being offered ‘in’ and ‘for’ local communities. From next year, at least from a UK government funding perspective, ‘Community Learning’ will be no more in England. From August 2024 the new term of ‘Tailored Learning’ will be adopted instead, despite having scant provenance within adult learning. Such a name change suggests a neo-liberal political ideology and strengthens the current argument that adult learning which is paid for by the state should be for employment purposes, or a steppingstone to employment only. Will the new term act as a marker of increased focus on meeting individual needs, or will learning be increasingly tailored to meet employer needs? It can of course be argued that ‘Tailored Learning’ will seek to achieve both ends but, even if this is the case, the pendulum may well have swung even further towards state-funded adult learning being the facilitator of a relationship between the individual and employers. With an election looming, ‘Tailored Learning’ could either be a short-lived or a long-term change. On the surface, a change of name and re-categorisation of purposes does not mean that adult learning cannot continue to take place ‘in’ and ‘for’ communities. However, it does take adult learning further along the tracks of ‘efficiency’ and ‘utility’ and is therefore worthy of continued critical debate.

**Key words: community learning, tailored learning, neo-liberalism, employment**

Lisa entered nervously. I had expected her to, because a volunteer in digital skills at the local library had been in contact to warn me in advance. With carefully applied eyeliner flicks and scrunched up hair, she could have been one of dozens of nervous adult learners I meet each year. After a while, she explained that she had been awake since 4am and had not eaten because she had been so nervous. Adult learners frequently describe their anxiety at coming to their first class. I once taught a learner who told me that it took four attempts before they could even

walk through the door and had just kept on going home. They all have their stories which give insights into why they have come and, more importantly, what they have had to overcome. Often, they are sad stories, like the man who had stayed in his home for three years because of social anxiety. Lisa had many stories, but what stood out most was her journey that day from her home in an ex-pit village on the outskirts of the city. As she explained ‘I walked it because I didn’t have the fare. It only took an hour or so. I don’t mind, I’m used to it’. Although many adult learners qualify for free public transport, in Lisa’s case she lived just under the three-mile distance which would have entitled her to this.

In a country where it is estimated that more than half of adults walk less than a mile a day (Guardian, 2017), this shows significant determination on Lisa’s part, in addition to overcoming the anxiety described. Although there is no doubt that physical exercise is good for us, it stands to reason that many people would simply not consider walking so far to attend a two-hour class. That is, if they had already overcome the high levels of anxiety that an average 37.1% of women and 29.9% of men report, and which erodes confidence (Mental Health Foundation, 2023). One of the most obvious justifications for community learning is to reduce some of the stressors that inhibit engagement in the first place. Although there are many different interpretations of what community learning is, this article’s key concern is learning being offered ‘in’ and ‘for’ local communities. As I will discuss, community learning numbers have diminished in recent decades to the point where, at least from a government funding perspective, the name will be no more from August 2024, yet the need is greater than ever.

Amongst the morass of data generated in an adult learning sector long known for its ‘niggling regulations’ (Edwards, 1961 p.120), there is something vaguely Orwellian in the official statistics that are published. Replace such lines as ‘In the preceding quarter, it appeared, the Tenth Three-Year Plan’s quota for bootlaces had been overfulfilled by 98 percent’ from Orwell’s bleakly dystopian novel *1984* (Orwell, p.266.), with ‘Community learning participation increased by 24.9% to 304,400 in 2021/2022, compared to the same period in 2020/21’. Similarly, such statistics cannot disguise the truth that there has been a stark decline in numbers participating in the last decade, or the planned renaming of the term ‘community learning’ altogether in July 2024.

At present, adult learning classes are divided into those funded by the Adult Education Budget that are mostly made up of learners taking award-bearing vocational and functional-skills

classes, and AEB ‘Community Learning’ classes that “aim to offer a range of non-formal courses to promote civic engagement and community development” (National Statistics, 2023). In the academic year 2022/2023 enrolments on community learning classes stood at 274, 090, in comparison to the last post-Covid 19-year 2018/19 when the figure was 490,300. Although some of this decrease may well be attributed to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic, it is still a shockingly low number, considering that numbers were already in decline from a figure of 657,200 in 2013/14. The rapid decline in numbers has prompted leading voices in adult education such as Sir Alan Tuckett (2019) to ask, ‘Why has England seemingly set out to destroy adult learning opportunities?’. In addition to this, there is also the decline in overall spending on adult learning which, at £1.4 billion in 2021-22, was more than two-thirds lower in real terms than the £4.6 billion spend in 2003-04 (House of Commons Library, 2023, p.12). To put this most recent figure in perspective, such an amount is equivalent to less than the construction cost of five miles of the new HS2 high speed rail link between London and Birmingham, where even conservative estimates place the cost per mile as exceeding 300 million pounds (The Times, 2023). It is starker still to think that, as approximately 20% of the overall adult education budget is dedicated to community learning, it is in turn valued as having less worth than a mile of train track. As O’Hare observes, adult education has historically “waxed and waned on a financial tide” (1981, p.64) and, if this is the case, the current situation must surely be the ‘waning crescent’ phase for adult community learning.

Having variously been described as sporadic, haphazard, fragmented, unstable, bureaucratic, unintegrated and lacking vision, the demise of community learning is even more startling when some of the statistics associated with this funding stream are considered (Bynner, 2017; Fieldhouse, 1998; Kelly, 1992; Ben Rees, 1982; Tuckett, 2015). Of the 1,612,600 adult learners participating in courses during 2022/23, only 25,900 were categorized as being ‘neighbourhood learning in deprived communities’ (UKSA, 2022), or 1.5%. As a percentage of those participating in community learning, the figure is still a low 9.4%. However, such is the multifariousness of the sector, other adult learning opportunities will have been available in many deprived neighbourhoods through a ‘dizzying array of funding streams’ (The Centre for Social Justice, 2020, p.35). How many would be almost impossible to calculate.

So, what next for this funding stream? As of August 2024, Community Learning will no longer exist, at least in name. Some may argue that, as enrolment numbers have been in decline for

over a decade, its demise is only to be expected. A recent government consultation report stated that:

We have set out the outcomes that tailored learning, (the new name for non-qualification provision, which includes what is currently AEB community learning, formula-funded AEB non-regulated learning, and any new employer-facing innovative provision), should support, ensuring it is primarily focused on progression into employment, but it can also support wider outcomes, including ensuring educational achievement, mental health and wellbeing. (ESFA, 2023, p.8)

Further to this, the report states that:

We have responded to the strong feedback that provision needs to continue to support learners furthest from the labour market and deliver wider benefits, such as improved health and wellbeing. (p.8)

Any doubt that the original intention was for future adult learning provision to solely focus on employability outcomes appears later when explaining that ‘We have therefore revised the outcomes that tailored learning can support to ensure provision can carry on supporting wider outcomes’. (p.22). There are now seven such outcomes categorizing what tailored learning will fund.

AC L1	Engaging and/or building confidence
AC L2	Preparation for further learning
AC L3	Preparation for employment
AC L4	Improving essential skills including English, ESOL, Maths and Digital
AC L5	Equipping parents/carers to support children's learning

AC L6	Health and well-being
AC L7	Developing stronger communities

Figure 1: Tailored (Community) Learning Outcomes

Not only will the name be changed, but funding streams will also be merged so that ‘Providers will receive a single Adult Skills Fund allocation. We expect, as now, the bulk of the provision to be the delivery of qualifications based on employer-led standards’ (p.23).

It would be easy to consider the politics of the current adult learning paradigm as a single Party agenda, but the waning of adult learning for anything other than employability purposes would be better described as a neo-liberal view, focused on human capital and the economic worth of the individual.

Twenty-five years ago, David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, delivered perhaps the last great statement regarding Adult Education by a British politician, when presenting an all-encompassing vision of why lifelong learning is so important:

To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with rapid change, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives, we cannot rely on a small elite. We will need creativity, enterprise and scholarship for all our people ... Learning enables people to play a full part in the community and strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us to fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake and are encouraging adults to enter and re-enter learning at every point of their lives as parents, at work, and as citizens. (Blunkett 1998: 2–3, p.68)

Although the years since Blunkett’s statement have seen a plethora of reports which have shifted opinion about what is considered ‘useful’ and therefore fundable learning, one of the most influential was the 2005 Leitch Report, *Skills in the UK* (Leitch, 2006), which reported

that one third of adults did not have the equivalent of a basic school-leaving qualification, that almost half had difficulty with numbers, and one seventh were not functionally literate. The Leitch Report's emphasis on the importance of developing vocational skills swayed the argument of what is deemed 'useful' firmly towards vocationalism. In the same year, the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Alan Johnson, concluded that:

We must rebalance taxpayers' money towards the subjects where there is greatest need - so more plumbing, less Pilates; subsidised precision engineering, not over-subsidised flower arranging, except of course where flower arranging is necessary for a vocational purpose. Tai chi may be hugely valuable to people studying it, but it's of little value to the economy. (MacLeod, 7 June 2006).

Despite this, many academics and educators have continued to voice concerns about the shift towards adult education being increasingly focused on the development of economic capital (Bynner, 2017; Derrick, 2010; Tuckett, 2015). Writers such as John Field (2005) have argued against the downgrading of social cohesion and well-being goals in favour of economic priorities. It has also been argued that government policies fail to foster a culture of learning communities because they are too narrowly focused on utilitarianism and on auditable, short-term outcomes (Unwin and Fuller, 2003).

During the spring/ summer of 2020, I spent time interviewing present and retired community learning educators as part of a research project seeking to capture the history of a local authority adult education service. I was most interested in the definition by one educator of over forty years' experience when they explained that:

'Community learning is when you work with the people; with who they are, where they are and with what they want to know. Then you'll see people move and grow. Lots of times learners have said to me that I can't realise how hard it was for them to come through the door. That is why as a tutor you must be adaptable, versatile and take some flack because sometimes they are nervous. Many of them don't even like to move between areas in the West End'.

Talking to her, I wondered how many potential learners are lost because they simply do not have the confidence to leave their local area. If learning at a familiar community venue is an anxiety inducing first step, then walking into a larger college is surely going to be a step too

far for many. This is a sentiment echoed in the interviews conducted with community learning tutors by Lancaster University which attempted to capture some of the spirit of the 'Right to Learn' movement in the 1970s, 'You need to have somewhere that we call a safe place to start but somewhere where people can come without difficulty, close to home, all those sorts of things.'(Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). Certainly, in my own experience, working as a community educator, I have met numerous people who have expressed exactly these sentiments. For every Lisa with the determination to overcome barriers to learning there are many more for whom the barriers are too problematic.

A final, yet important consideration is the change of name or, perhaps more accurately, re-branding. Such renaming is often intended to send a strong signal to stakeholders that there is a shift in policy or strategy (Kapferer, 1995; Yesilkagit et al, 2022). No explanation has been given for the change to a name with little provenance within adult learning, but there is surely something ironic in that 'community' is derived from the Latin *communis*, which means 'common, public, shared by all or many', whereas 'tailored' is derived from the Latin *taliare* 'to split or cut'. A cursory internet search of literature on tailored learning yielded one book and a solitary article, the former being concerned with tailoring training programmes for organisations (Hofman and Minor, 2009), whilst the latter's use would be better termed as 'personalised learning' for engineering students (Doss et al, 2021). The question is for whose benefit will we be expected to tailor learning? Is the term a marker of increased focus on meeting individual needs, or a marker that learning will be increasingly tailored to meet employer needs? It can of course be argued that tailored learning will seek to achieve both ends but, even if this is the case, the pendulum will have swung almost completely to adult learning being the facilitator of a relationship between the individual and employers. It could be argued that tailored learning can still take place in and for communities, but surely if that was a priority the word 'community' would not be completely removed from the guidance.

Such a name change reflects a political ideology, and strengthens the current argument that adult learning which is paid for by the state should be for employment purposes, or a steppingstone to employment only. As it explicitly states, 'The Adult Skills Fund cannot be used to fund provision for "leisure" purposes only' (ESFA, 2023). A similar name change reflecting an ideological shift came in the renaming of the National Institute of Continuing Education, which for so many years championed the value of learning for citizenship and social

well-being. Founded in 1921, it was renamed as the Learning and Work Institute in 2016, and a brief look at its website leaves the viewer in no doubt that its mission is now almost exclusively to promote learning for work purposes. Names and name changes reflect the policy priorities of a government (Hammond, 1996) and the change to ‘Tailored Learning’ aligns with a neo-liberal ideology that stresses certain themes such as individual responsibility and decreased state interventionism and downplays others such as solidarity and community (Gooby and Leruth, 2028). In the face of such overwhelming political expansionism, ‘community learning’ needs to find ways to rebut such an economically rational view of adult learning if only to legitimise and protect itself as a concept that transcends the political arena (Little, p.5).

Many working within the sector actively resist neo-liberal politics by exploiting the haphazard and vague nature of the funding guidance (Tett & Hamilton, 2019). With creative thinking, almost any type of learning can be argued as having wellbeing or employability outcomes. Unfortunately, for other adult learning educators this can cause uncertainty and hesitance. With adult learning under threat as never before, those working within the sector might be best advised to consider Paolo Freire’s (1986) words when explaining that ‘education is politics! After that, when a teacher discovers that he or she is a politician, too, the teacher has to ask, what kind of politics am I doing in the classroom?’ (p. 46). As community educators, we might not want to do politics, but regardless of this, politics will continue to affect the work we do.

The old wisdom has always been that the first steppingstone to further learning or employment is learning opportunities in local communities as this alleviates some barriers to engagement. This logic works equally for recent governments whose concern is for adult learning for employment outcomes, or those who aspire to a broader offer (Biesta, 2015; Coffield, 2011; Pring, 1999). Decreased funding, restrictive funding guidance and a gradual reduction in the number of courses offered has decimated community learning numbers (Staufenberg, 2020). Faced with such a problem, the answer seems to be a re-invention of community learning rather than a renaissance. Regardless of whether someone thinks that a name is important in education, or even a function that they agree with, what is important is that learning is still offered ‘in’ communities and ‘for’ communities. It is perhaps worth all our whiles to ponder the words of Martin Luther King:

It seems to me that education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of man and in society: the one is utility and the other is culture... The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. (Luther, 1947)

With an election looming, 'Tailored Learning' could either be short-lived or a long-term change. Although on the surface a change of name and re-categorisation of purposes does not mean that adult learning cannot continue to take place 'in' and 'for' communities, it does take adult learning further along the tracks of 'efficiency' and 'utility' and therefore is worthy of continued critical debate.

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