

Adult education in Scotland: past and present

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The distinction that is sometimes made between 'radical' and 'respectable' traditions in Scottish adult education (Bryant, 1984) highlights the importance of ideological purpose in thinking about the history of adult education and its current state today. The radical tradition refers to adult learning based on a curriculum concerned with social and political change whereas the respectable tradition describes provision aimed primarily at personal development or individual advancement. Reality may have been more complicated than this simple distinction implies, but it remains a useful starting point for analysing adult education.

The roots of the respectable tradition can be traced back to the important influence of protestant Calvinism and Presbyterianism. The ideals of thrift, discipline and self-improvement associated with these religious beliefs generated a culture that supported education as a means of acquiring both spiritual salvation and material advancement – along with a wider appreciation of culture and the arts. Education has always had a high value in Scottish culture which historically, for adults, took the form of autodidactic learning and mutual improvement (Cooke, 2006). A secular and institutionalised version of this self-help culture was evident in the growth of Mechanics Institutes in the late 18th century, which were essentially aimed at improving the scientific understanding of skilled artisans, and their emergence in Scotland led to their growth across the UK in the 19th century.

The radical tradition was linked with the growth of socialist ideology in the 19th and 20th centuries. The movement for social and political change provided a 'rough and ready' form of adult learning for social and political action that reached a broad and developing working-class constituency which was becoming conscious of itself as a class. It was not until the early 20th century, with the growing strength of radical political parties, that educational organisations developed to support the struggles of the labour movement. (Crowther, 1999). The communist inspired Labour Colleges in the 1920s provided the first systematic attempt at radical education provision for working people based on a Marxist inspired curriculum. The aim was to intellectually equip organisers at the point of production to play their part in leading the anticipated political revolution. The rival organisation, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) which was founded in 1903, adopted a broader ideology and curriculum but it too was geared towards providing education for working people to become social and political leaders.

In contrast, the respectable tradition in the first half of the 20th century was linked with the slow growth of university outreach provision – a patchwork of liberal adult education classes, leisure and interest-based courses, provided mainly by the ancient Scottish universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, St Andrews and Aberdeen – and local authority adult education classes covering a similar if less 'high brow' range of subjects. The other important strand of educational provision (or, more accurately, training) was 'night classes' which offered certificated vocational courses mainly in further education colleges. In statistical terms, more people were probably involved in vocational training than all other forms of adult education put together.

In reality, the overlap between the radical and respectable traditions is also important because they have been reformulated and reconfigured over time, partly because of

the growth of the welfare state in the 20th century and partly because of changing currents of social and political struggle. The development of community education in the 1970s drew on these distinct traditions.

Following the recommendations of the 1975 Alexander Report, *Adult Education: The Challenge of Change*, the expansion of adult education provision by local authorities, particularly in disadvantaged communities, led to the creation of Community Education Services, which combined adult education, community development and youth work into an integrated service. The main aim was to widen educational opportunities for traditional 'non-participants' by adopting a 'community development approach'. The focus of intervention was primarily the individual, but it was also understood that adult education could be an integral part of the process of social change as the following quote indicates:

Society is now less certain about the values it should uphold and tolerates a wide range. Individual freedom to question the value of established practices and institutions and to propose new forms is part of our democratic heritage. To maintain this freedom, resources should not be put at the disposal only of those who conform but ought reasonably to be made available to all for explicit educational purposes. The motives of those who provide education need not necessarily be identified with the motives of those for whom it is provided. (Scottish Education Department 1975, 25).

Official support for dissent and its value to a democratic society encouraged educational links with social movements, especially the peace movement and women's movement, which helped to reinvigorate the social purpose of organisations like the WEA. In addition, the translation of Paulo Freire's ideas into English in the early 1970s chimed with the new emphasis on cultural struggle and the role of education as a resource for oppressed and exploited groups. The Adult Learning Project, which was established in Edinburgh in 1979, was an attempt to translate Freire's ideas on cultural action into the Scottish context (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1989). This initiative in community-based adult education has attracted considerable international interest over the years, and made a small but important contribution to the growth of devolution and the democracy movement in the 1990s, which eventually led to the establishment of the new Scottish Parliament in 1999.

Despite this, the overall assessment should recognise the fragmented and localised nature of the radical tradition in adult education. The marginal status of community education in welfare policy created conditions where experimentation and creativity sometimes flourished and where different and, at times conflicting, ideological approaches co-existed – but it also limited their impact geographically and institutionally. On the whole, adult education outside of formal provision has been characterised by official indifference, the strong preference being for institutional and credentialised forms of learning and education. The policy emphasis on essentially economic and instrumental model of lifelong learning for people in the labour market has also added to this trend (Crowther, 2006).

Despite the relative autonomy of the Scottish Parliament the overall policy pattern for lifelong learning, across the UK, involves individuals taking responsibility for looking after themselves and their families by training and retraining rather than depending on state welfare provision (Martin, 2003). This, in turn, has had a marked impact on adult education in that the grassroots' perspective which permeated the Alexander Report, implied a constructivist view of knowledge whereby people learned from their

experience and education was a resource for addressing their individual and collective problems. In contrast, the primary value now attached to lifelong learning is to acquire instrumental knowledge and skills which will be 'delivered' in a variety of contexts and modes. This emphasis on packaged instrumental skills for work, as distinct from a curriculum based on the interests of people in communities, plays an increasingly important role in what is deemed worth learning and what type of society we want to become.

Another feature of this new policy context is the emphasis on the role of adult education in promoting social cohesion in a context of steadily increasing inequality (Tett, 2006). Adult education has either to fulfil tightly controlled policy objectives – for which funding is available – or it must increasingly operate in a culture dominated by market values. For example, adult literacy is a current policy priority and has received substantial resources with the aim of reaching 150,000 new learners in Scotland in a five-year period. Provision is free, and some interesting and creative work is occurring. The consequence, however, is that adult learning without a literacy component is under-resourced and largely dependent on adult educators obtaining short-term funding sources which have a limited lifespan and impact. This is the case in the voluntary sector in particular but also in local authority provision more generally. Furthermore, adult classes provided by local authorities – which from the 1970s began to reach a wider constituency – are increasingly driven by market criteria, which has meant that subsidies for low-waged and unemployed groups have been cut and class fees increased. The market processes now at work will serve to restrict and stratify the student body and undermine progress that has been made on providing a varied curriculum open to a wide range of adults.

Widening participation, in terms of increasing the number of students enrolling in higher education, has been an important part of the UK policy agenda. This has led to the emergence of learning support services within higher and further education to enable students to cope with academic study and literacy demands. In this respect, what some adult educators – particularly literacy practitioners - used to do in communities is now provided within these formal institutions. This trend is reinforcing a 'respectable' model of progression in adult education understood primarily in terms of acquiring formal educational qualifications and credentials which are subject to inflation. Meanwhile, a wider sense of what progression might mean, or one that is framed in advancing social and collective interests, is simply no longer on the agenda.

A notable difference in higher education in Scotland, compared to the rest of the UK, is that there is no payment of student fees – at least for the time being (Paterson, 2000). Students are able to take out loans to cover living costs which are subsequently re-paid when they begin earning a specified level of income. Despite this, the overall pattern across the UK is that the costs of higher education have shifted away from the state and onto students and their families. One all too predictable result is that the proportion of working-class students entering higher education is in decline. The selective nature of the education system has not significantly changed because market mechanisms have simply replaced or, more likely, reinforced social and cultural expectations as barriers to entering higher education. The direction is clear: it is towards a new kind of respectable adult education in which learning is driven by the needs of the economy and social cohesion is organised through market mechanisms.

Despite the above picture, autonomous forms of radical adult learning linked to social and political change remain important – even if many adult educators find it difficult to

create the space to justify making connections with them. Nevertheless, a number of deep-seated issues such as the continuing democratic deficit, the degradation of the environment, the experience of globalisation, a crisis of public welfare, foreign policy, and so on, are actively stimulating resistance and spawning popular movements which ally adult learning and collective action (Crowther, Galloway and Martin, 2005). There are still adult and community educators who seek to maintain a radical ideological stance in their work, but they have to negotiate and compromise what they can do within the constraints of a hostile policy environment and, in the context of public sector cutbacks, this is increasingly difficult as well as increasingly urgent.

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