

Workers' Educational Association: A Crisis of Identity? Personal Perspectives on Changing Professional Identities.

Sam Davis, Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Introduction

This paper presents some of the key findings from a qualitative study I conducted between 2005-2014 which explored the impact of a dramatically changed educational landscape on informal adult educators who had been working with and for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) since the 1980s. The WEA - a voluntary organisation established in 1903 to '*promote the higher education of working men*' (Doyle, 2003, p.6) - has grown to become the UK's largest voluntary adult education provider with an organisational mission to educate for '*a better world, equal, democratic and just*' (WEA, 2013).

My interest in this - and more specifically in the impact of policy upon praxis – arose from a personal and professional commitment to the concept of '*really useful knowledge*' (Johnson,1979) which I interpret as the kind of political consciousness-raising that reflects an active, educative commitment to local democracy and global social justice. Again, for both personal and professional reasons these have been important and developing commitments throughout my life which I keenly felt were under threat in the early 1990s as a result of growing instrumentalism in education and the advancement of a neoliberal agenda. This informed the location and methodology of my research.

Largely based on the rich narratives from six of the WEA's longest-serving adult educators, I deploy a critical realist analysis of the data to reveal some fascinating personal insights about how and why the professional identities of informal adult educators are changing, but in doing so, discover an over-arching meta-narrative about the structure-agency relationship. Using Archer's multi-layered theory of the morphogenetic cycle (1995) I illustrate in detail how these narratives demonstrate the formation of agency and uncover the conditions necessary for agential powers to

develop and flourish which, as my research shows, creates social actors who are powerful enough to effect transformations at an individual and societal level.

The Research Participants

The sample consisted of three men and three women who volunteered to take part in this research. All satisfied the essential criteria of serving the WEA for a minimum of 20 years and having performed the vitally important post of WEA Tutor Organiser for the same amount of time. Having exceeded data saturation point with six participants, I sought no further contributions. As is evident from their biographies, each gravitated to the WEA in very different ways and for different reasons:

Liz was a former nurse who joined the WEA 20 years ago as a part-time tutor, before becoming a full-time Tutor Organiser. She described herself as a feisty working-class, anti-imperialist woman. This political identity is important to her and is directly linked with the WEA in some way because it allowed her to operate within these labels, and is why she chose to work for the WEA.

Pat (now retired) was a secondary school teacher before joining the WEA for a career that spanned 30 years. Pat recalled the turning point for her and her relationship with the WEA was when she attended a joint WEA course called 'A Woman's Place'. It was her introduction to feminist theory, and it was the first time she experienced an environment of like-minded people where she could find a theoretical framework for her thoughts.

Jim (who has now left the WEA) spent over 20 years with the association. He first came into contact with the WEA as a student on a short course when he was working as a labourer. He went on to become a part-time tutor, a full-time Tutor Organiser and Regional Education Manager. His own school experiences gave him his political perspective and a mistrust of formal examinations as an indication of intellectual capability and worth. Jim believed that working for the WEA enabled him to engage working-class adults who were denied an education, and to inspire them through literature in the way it had inspired him.

Sheila was a former sewing machinist and miner's wife. She has worked for the WEA for over 20 years as a tutor, Tutor Organiser and Regional Education Manager. The Miners' Strike in 1984/85 was a key event in her life and it is at this time she became involved with the 'political side of things'. It is where her education started and it introduced her to activities which encompassed everything from reading a novel to doing some analysis of how this linked into her own life.

Rob has been associated with the WEA for over 20 years: first as a voluntary member whilst at university and then as a full-time Tutor Organiser. He formerly worked for a major trade union and an organisation that did campaign work for the unemployed. He currently works as a Regional Educational Manager. Rob described himself as a socialist and chose to work for the WEA because he believed that education could be used as a tool by which a better world could be won.

Nigel was attracted to the WEA because of his interest in trade unions and shop steward education. He had no prior connections to the WEA before joining as a tutor and said that at the time he did not know what the organisation stood for. His career as a Tutor Organiser spans over 27 years and he is currently a Regional Director. He doesn't see the WEA as ideologically driven, but as an organisation which offers marvelous opportunities to do interesting work.

Research Methodology

From 2005 - 2007 I engaged in in-depth desktop research about the WEA its history, values and practices, because, as an outsider, I felt this was important in order to gain a '*deep understanding of the relevant literature*' (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998, pp.154ff). I then held individual conversational interviews for 90 minutes in locations agreeable to the participants (home; work; a college and library). The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The levels of narrative competence (Willis, 1990, p.5) demonstrated by each of the participants resulted in six highly reflexive biographical narratives which were rich

with 'thick description' (Geertz,1973) and loaded with fascinating insights about the impact of policy upon informal adult education practice since the1980s. Despite the personal nature of the narratives there emerged some cross-cutting themes which resonated with all the participants and indeed with dominant themes found in the wider literature.

Key Findings

1. Individual and Organisational Autonomy

Without exception, all the participants highlighted the importance of personal autonomy in their role, giving them the licence to interpret the organisational mission according to their own interests. This freedom was supported by the WEA's original structure of semi-autonomous Branches and Districts and resulted in what many of the participants consider to be WEA best practice and even part of its unique identity: promoting and addressing a local agenda; encouraging diversity; taking risks; experimenting with provision in the community; being flexible and responding to the needs of its students. However, it appears that the structure which supported those practices and provision had some serious weaknesses, as Nigel explained:

If you look at the way the WEA used to be, you can see... you've got all those embedded habits of personal ownership at work, diversity and an absence of any proper management structure: an absence of clarity about budgets, targets and quality regime. Clearly people's autonomy and ownership of their work's important, but you really didn't get any feedback on your work with the WEA back then, and there was no staff review system or any informal equivalent of that, so you wouldn't really get a lot of advice or guidance about how to develop your work - [which] was quite diverse ... there weren't a lot of common strands, and so although it gave marvellous opportunities to do interesting work, it meant your work was quite a specific and personal thing... So as an organisation it was shambolic to be honest, and not particularly coherent...

The internal restructure of the 1990s and the more recent radical restructure of the WEA in 2004 swept away the association's original federal structure - and with it the quintessential WEA roles of Tutor Organiser and lay tutor - with the general effect of professionalising and standardising WEA processes and provision:

Sheila: The Learning and Skills Council priorities have affected the WEA mission because what we've now got to do is set up courses which fit into a particular remit: we've got to have 10 bums on seats, and we've got to show a clear progression route from those courses, whereas the model we're talking about is one about a process, which can take time. What I'm interested in is the impact on local communities, and a course doesn't have an impact on communities. You need to gather folk together to say: what are the issues affecting our community and what can we do about it? And only by educating local people can they bring about changes, it's not about us bringing about changes - it's about local communities bringing about changes, and a sense of ownership, and a course doesn't give people a sense of ownership. So the priorities are shifting us away from what I feel WEA should be about.

2. Funding and Quality Assurance

The functions of funding and inspection had already successfully restructured community education, an important ideological site for alternative adult pedagogy, and these same functions were now impacting on the WEA. Reliant on state funds, the WEA could not circumvent the strict criteria used to release those funds; nor could they escape the positivist quality assurance processes that managed their use. One of the effects of the funding regime was to formalise informal processes by cutting out the engagement role of the Tutor Organiser - taking staff away from what they loved doing best: meeting people and organising community activities such as coffee mornings; residential or informal groups for women to have a go at designing and delivering their own learning. Sheila explained:

The funding doesn't allow us to engage in that kind of process - unless we're bringing in external funding - which we've recently just done, to test out engagement models ...and... I got quite excited about it 'cause I thought the WEA's not been doing this for a long time. What we do now is offer courses. So I jumped in and said, 'Can we have that money?' and, you know, we did manage to appoint a development worker, and this approach has proved successful time and time again. There's been enough written about it actually, and we know now what works...But that's my experience - equally it's the experience of lots of other adult education theorists, you know...

The terms of the funding regime affected *all* organisations in receipt of state funds and over time blurred the distinctions that once existed between the providers as they geared up to deliver the educational priorities of the state. This resulted in the WEA providing more basic skills education and award-bearing courses. For an organisation that claimed to be demand led, non-vocational and emancipatory, this was problematic. As Rob pointed out:

The whole agenda now is very focussed on the individual and that is dangerous because, of course, it takes away from the whole notion of the collective aspects of our type of education. That again is government policy: where everything's built round individual learning plans, a sort of individualisation of education, I suppose.

Avoiding the narrow instrumentalism of government policy through subversion rarely happened because organisations could not escape the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) demands or the Inspectorate's extensive authority, which could scrutinise providers and enforce their compliance to deliver what the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) perceived to be good quality in teaching and learning.

It is clear from this research that ALI's definition was prescriptive: visualising the student journey as an unproblematic, linear pathway of distinct and incremental parts

from initial assessment to qualification stage. This was at odds with the WEA's understanding of good quality adult education which was more inclusive and, like education characteristic of the sector, messy. Forced to comply with its funder and the inspectorate, this agenda of 'improvement' had the greatest impact on the role of the lay tutor, one of the WEA's oldest and most democratic functions:

Liz: One of the best tutors I've ever worked with... was a train driver - an autodidact, who was very enthusiastic about classical music and taught the best music appreciation courses anybody could ever wish to attend. He would be excluded from teaching at the WEA now because he doesn't have teaching qualifications...

The professionalisation of the WEA has not only removed lay tutors from teaching but Tutor Organisers also who, post 2004, increasingly began to manage more staff and quality assurance issues. Professionalisation under the banner of improvement has also weakened the once powerful student voice as genuine opportunities to influence the WEA's educational agenda have diminished. This has divided opinion within the cohort because, despite being able to single out some tangible benefits as a result of professionalisation (it is now easier to roll-out best practice from curriculum groups across the WEA, exploit greater economies of scale in resourcing and offer a more coherent accredited programme), the majority felt that it had weakened the voluntary movement:

Rob: There's been this massive professionalisation of the whole sector ... and obviously we're in there, and that's been a double-edged sword. I'm personally naturally wary about professionalisation. I think it was George Bernard Shaw who said 'all professions are a conspiracy against the laity.' I rather like that. Anyway, here I am sitting as a professional, so-called, but I think we have to be a bit self-critical and sceptical about the whole notion of professionalism. That said, we have to function, we have to be good, don't we?

This begs the question: what should the WEA be good at? For the participants in this study it meant putting the learners' needs before policy objectives which, as my research highlights, has become difficult - if not impossible - to do. This has had a serious impact on the role of the student in the WEA, curtailing their ability to influence their learning or become involved in the wider movement.

3. WEA Students and the Voluntary Movement

Without question, the ideological restructuring of education in recent years has had the greatest impact on the adult learner, transforming the *what, how* and *why* of adult education. Nowhere have these changes been more evident than in the WEA where learners used to be an integral part of an empowering educational experience and movement. The role of the 'special relationship' between the tutor and student was crucial in this but, as my study reveals, developments in WEA provision particularly the externally generated Workplace and Community Programmes - have weakened this connection, leaving tutors and students cut off from the movement, and sometimes even unaware of the WEA's historic educational purpose.

Rob: The organisation was based on a lay movement, (which it still is, albeit weak), and there is an issue about what is the relationship between a tutor and a class, and the students and the voluntary movement? What is the methodology of the WEA? What is the intention of a WEA class? ... Some WEA practice remains in the best tradition; in other words: the relationship is one of equality, it's one where the tutor has something to offer, but so do the students – 'we're all teachers', 'we're all learners', that sort of philosophy. It's one of democratic practice, and negotiating a curriculum...

Thus, the very purpose and praxis of WEA education was embedded within this 'special relationship', through which 'hard to reach' adult learners were encouraged to participate, but more importantly - and critically for an educational movement - to *act*. This special relationship seems to have been defined by the presence of three specific elements: 1) an informal methodology, 2) a commitment to egalitarian

relationships and 3) the belief that education should serve the interests of participative democracy. In this way, the adult learner could not only shape their own education locally but also develop their agency to influence a much bigger educational agenda.

Conclusion

It is clear from my research that the structures once supporting 'really useful knowledge' in the WEA (and beyond) have changed and that this has radically transformed every aspect of adult education in the UK today. The spaces where informal, transformative adult education used to occur have been squeezed, factored out at the planning stages, making it extremely challenging for adult educators to practise what they commonly refer to as socially purposeful education. Those performative instrumental forces that have shaped education over the last 40 years have resulted in a ubiquitous form of 'Benetton-style educational provision' (Thompson, 1993) that is not just ineffectual in breaking the cycle of disadvantage, but arguably supports and reproduces it. This should concern the state because rising inequalities have a lasting social and financial cost: blighting the lives of great swathes who, once confined to the 'swine heap' (Williams, 1961), become a burden to the welfare state.

The Future of the Old Tradition in Adult Education

What hope is there for adult educators who believe in the old tradition? Some of the cohort believed that 'fine possibilities' would still continue to exist to do work around social inclusion, poverty and development but others were more sceptical, unconvinced that adult education - in its current guise - would be capable of creating agents who could act collectively for the common good.

Creating such agents is vital, not only for the future of 'really useful knowledge' but for participatory democracy so that we can gain a deeper understanding of the problems that cause disadvantage and participate in finding solutions (Boggs, 1991). This is crucial if we are 'to work for a political community in which democracy has some meaning' (Smith, 1994, p.4). I believe Archer's theory of human agency (1995, 2000) is valuable here and I used this framework to analyse the participants'

narratives which illuminated how agency is formed, under what conditions it flourishes and how ordinary people can develop to do extra-ordinary things.

References

- Anderson, G. & Arsenault, N. (1998) *Fundamentals of Educational Research*. London: Routledge-Falmer.
- Archer, M.S. (2000) *Being Human, The Problem of Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M.S. (1995) *Realist Social Theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boggs, D.L. (1991) Civic Education: An Adult Education Imperative. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42 (1), pp.46-55.
- Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education. An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Free Press.
- Doyle, M. (2003) *A Very Special Adventure: the illustrated history of the workers' educational association*. London: Workers Educational Association Publishers.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Johnson, R. (1979) "Really useful knowledge": Radical education and working-class culture, 1790-1848. In: J. Clarke, C. Critcher & R. Johnson, eds. *Working-class Culture*. New York: St Martin's Press, pp.75-102.
- Smith, M. (1994) *Local Education: Community, conversation and praxis*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Thompson, J. (1993) Learning, Liberation and Maturity. An open letter to whoever's left. *Adults Learning*, 4 (9), p.244.
- Workers' Educational Association. (2013) www.wea.org/home.
- Williams, R. (1961) An Open Letter to W.E.A. Tutors. In: J. McIlroy and S. Westwood, eds. *Border Country. Raymond Williams in adult education*. Leicester: NIACE.

Endnotes