

## Imagining a different future

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### Abstract

*Most providers engage in evaluation but, often, there is little opportunity to record in any depth the experience of returning to learning and the difference it has made to learners. For that reason, the Edinburgh Adult Education Research Group undertook 10 life-story interviews with students to examine in-depth the impact adult learning had on their lives*

### A learner's story

*EM had a difficult formal education, disrupted by the Second World War. At school in England, where her father was stationed, she suffered bullying – by other students and by a teacher – and left, at 14, with few positive memories. She remembers being taught to write her name and address by her mother. Her best learning, she says, happened on the occasions she returned to Edinburgh to stay with relatives.*

*After leaving school, EM took a variety of jobs, including working at Boots the chemist and in a shoe factory. She wanted to be a chemist or a nurse, but her parents didn't support her ambitions. Living at home was tough. Her parents had a bad relationship and EM was often caught in the middle.*

*She got married but her husband was cruel and it ended in divorce. Her second husband was very 'traditional' and EM found herself confined to the home with her children. There were no opportunities to learn outside the home. It was a terribly difficult time. During the interview, she became emotional when speaking of her eldest daughter, who died when she was pushed off a building. EM was at her lowest point when she decided to return to education. Her neighbours were abusive and she was frightened to leave the house.*

*EM joined the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in 1999, enrolling on courses in creative writing and photography. She was unsure at first, worrying that she was not a 'worker', and felt conscious of her own lack of formal education (she left one class because of the well-educated students who talked too much and dominated discussion). But studying with the WEA gave her new life, she says. She looks on them as family and friends who have supported her for many years. She is eager to give something back to the WEA, and does so through her volunteering work. She is very positive about all the tutors and support within the organisation. She loves looking at the history of Edinburgh and linking it to her own. EM has plans to write a book about her own life.*

*Her advice for learners is just to take the plunge. She was not sure about starting adult education but decided to give it a try as she had nothing to lose. 'All the staff have been really wonderful and I've never regretted it,' she says.*

The story of EM's life may not be exactly typical of the learners we interviewed in this research but it will resonate with the many adult educators who have acquired insights into the lives of their students and who recognise how adult education can make a difference. Increasingly, however, adult education providers are required to demonstrate the impact of participation on learners' lives and, in the current context of austerity and the marketisation of services, the need to justify public resources for adult education is a major preoccupation and worry for those in the profession.

Of course, many providers engage in evaluation exercises, which provide valuable evidence of impact and insights from learners which are critical to shaping future services. However, evaluation usually occurs at the end of the learning programme and so focuses on the immediate outcomes for participants. This precludes a more in-depth opportunity for learners to reflect on and record their experiences of returning to learning and the difference it has made in their lives. To address this, the Edinburgh Adult Education Group, with the aid of a community education student on placement from the University of Edinburgh, undertook a small-scale research project to provide a more in-depth look at the impact of adult learning on the lives of some learners. Ten life-story interviews were carried out with adults who did not have a successful experience of school education and who did not engage in formal education immediately after leaving school. Six men and four women students drawn from a variety of community-based provision across Edinburgh contributed to the research.

The research aims were:

- To investigate the ways in which participation in community-based adult education impacts on learners' lives across four significant areas of life: personal, family, work and community; and
- To investigate how participation in community-based adult education has enabled learners to renegotiate their educational identity.

Learners were asked about their early education experiences, their motives for returning to learning, and the influence of adult education on their lives. The interviews were

digitally recorded, and written summaries and full transcriptions were made of each interview. These were coded and analysed collectively by the research group. Key findings from the research are divided into four categories: wounding learning experiences; breaking the mould; supportive learning; and impact of learning.

From an early age, wounding learning experiences can shape individuals' dispositions to learning in ways which have powerful long-term consequences. Learners can feel deeply disempowered, particularly through poor experiences of schooling, which lead to low self-esteem and feelings of intellectual failure throughout adult life. This finding will not be a surprise to many of those working in community-based adult education, and previous research in this area has highlighted the significance of social class, gender, school experience, family and employment, in shaping learners' attitudes towards learning and their expectations of failure or success. Social privileges in life usually turn into educational success; conversely, educational failure is often a reflection of an unequal social and economic landscape as well as a devalued cultural one. These factors feed into personal wounds as well as 'learning cultures', which can enable or disable opportunities for engaging with learning.

Most of the learners in our sample had experienced educational failure multiple times. Specifically, learners report that teaching methods at school were not conducive to their personal needs in that large classes and rote learning styles meant those who didn't keep up at school fell further behind; there are also accounts of specific learning difficulties which were not identified or supported. Moreover, the failure of educators to listen to learners' experiences deepened recursive and tumbling spirals of learner self-esteem. As a consequence, learners viewed returning to adult education as involving huge risk; sometimes it is hard to fully appreciate the important step individuals take in their decision to participate. This means, of course, that the triggers which motivated their actions are significant and that their return encounter to education has to be a welcoming and positive experience.

Memories of educational failure have to be overcome quickly if adult motivation is to be reinforced rather than squandered.

I always went to school, but I never got what I should have got out of it. I think what it was, when I went to the [adult] classes they were all smaller classes. It was more personal and not so daunting. AW

Learners in our sample welcomed small classes and being respected as an ‘equal in discussion’, a critical factor in transforming expectations. We found that breaking the mould of expectations is, on the one hand, partly achieved by good friendly interpersonal relations but, on the other, it is also a pedagogical, curriculum and organisational issue. Learners decide to return to education for a number of reasons: to learn things not learned at school, for employment, for entrance exams, to support their families and to pursue interests. Recognising and building on learners’ motivations to learn are essential for achievement. In organisational terms, accessible locations, informality, flexibility in terms of dropping in and dropping out, affordability and good-quality childcare are all ingredients in high-quality adult provision.

I can access basic numeracy and literacy classes at no cost, which is wonderful. It’s absolutely wonderful that people can do that and continue their learning. JM

One of the most significant themes that learners highlighted in their interviews was the crucial role played by their tutors. One of the contradictions of the lifelong learning policy agenda, which developed in the UK from the 1990s, has been that emphasising the focus on learners can mean overlooking their relationship with educators. In our sample it is clear that the subjectivity of the learner and the agency of the educator have to be seen as mutually related. This mutual relationship is supported by the Scottish social practice model, where adults’ life experiences are acknowledged and built on, which underpins the principles of teaching practice in a great deal of community-based education and contributes to successful learning experiences. Learners say they valued the following aspects of what tutors do to:

- create a relaxed, comfortable, unthreatening space;

- act as equals in the group by showing they are ‘willing to learn with the group’;
- tailor learning activities through negotiation with learners;
- encourage supportive rather than competitive relationships within the group;
- include activities for collaborative learning which motivate learners;
- welcome ideas which learners bring to the group;
- break learning down into manageable units and ways of understanding; and
- show they have a flexible approach to teaching.

Adult tutors are involved in re-positioning the educational relationship so that where learners previously felt they were slow and ignored at school, they now begin to feel they can go at their own pace, are listened to, and are encouraged by tutors. In theoretical terms, cognitive and affective processes are mutually supportive and recognising the importance of this for adult learning is critical to successful renegotiations of learner identities from poor to positive ones.

Productive tutor-learner relationships are also evident in the impact of community based adult education on learners’ lives. The important point shining through the data is that learners’ lives have to be understood holistically rather than as a mere labour market toolkit in need of new tools. Being ready to learn may not have a specific purpose, as the learner below states:

I decided because I just wanted to learn things I didn’t learn as well at school. That was the main reason why I went. I guess I was kind of more interested to learn now; I’m ready to learn now. SD

If we broaden the aperture from earning to learning, to include work as merely one of the motivations people bring with them to study, then a richer seam of impact of adult learning is revealed. Our research highlighted the significance of diverse motivations for learning, a diversity which is ignored in policy that only seems to recognise worthwhile learning as that which contributes to employability. If policymakers are seriously interested in building a knowledge society then starting from a social-practice perspective should be a key conceptual and pedagogical resource for successful policy.

Learners say the learning they have experienced has been a *lifeline*, giving purpose and a new capacity for living.

I write letters for my son, and I read for him some small stories. For my daily life, it has been a great success. For example, I can go to the train station and get a ticket, the bus station, speak with somebody or check some websites. AR

The confidence that it's given me is huge and it feels like I'm not locked out anymore, that there's a way in. I used to feel ashamed of not being able to participate. JJ

We asked learners to identify how they had benefitted from their experiences and the following list captures the main points made:

- acquiring a positive change in their self-identity as capable and intelligent learners;
- the acquisition of new skills and strategies in dealing with daily life (such as writing letters, using a computer, speaking and understanding English, coping with numeracy, acting with independence);
- increased confidence and improved self-esteem;
- enhanced skills for work;
- developed and improved social and interpersonal skills; and
- better able to engage in family learning.

Highly significant in the above is the way in which adult learning can involve the reconstruction of self-esteem, of feelings of recognition and positive learning identities, because, without this as a starting point, it is difficult to achieve other goals or even to keep motivated to learn. If adult motivations for learning are not fulfilled why should they persist? Moreover, persistence is necessary to begin to turn round deeply ingrained negative identities and low self-confidence. But once learners begin to see themselves in

a new light the possibilities for action and autonomy, individually and collectively, increase and the potential impact of community-based adult education is enhanced.

To return to EM's story at the beginning of this article, it is important to capture the wider picture of how adult education might help individuals change their life. EM's experience of the WEA led her to begin living a new kind of life and imagining a different future from the one she had lived. She is aware that the shadow of privilege in education can be present in adult education too – the well-educated who speak too much – but she is now confident in her own educational achievement and her willingness to volunteer reflects an awareness that she has valuable experience and knowledge too. The WEA is, she says, part of her family and friends – in short, she belongs.

Adult educators need to focus on the importance of identity work with students as the blocks created by prior negative learning experiences have to be addressed before any new and sustained learning can occur. Community-based adult education is, in this respect, a lifeline for some learners and is in a strategic position to foster positive learning identities. Above all, the qualities of the tutor to support and link learning to everyday life interests and issues is a critical catalyst for transforming and building new learners' identities and agency. If lifelong learning is to be meaningful it needs to address the real-life circumstances of the learner along with the importance of resourcing and investing in high-quality education. Our research demonstrates in a convincing way that learners' lives are complex and that learning should be *for* life.

*The authors are all members of the Edinburgh Adult Education Group, a partnership of providers from the local authority, the voluntary sector, museums, libraries and the University of Edinburgh, which aims to support and promote community-based education in the city. The research group was drawn from the wider adult learning body. The fieldwork, interviews and analysis for this research were carried out by Marita Fallon, postgraduate student, University of Edinburgh.*

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