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Blue Skies, Blue Collars: Learning Cultures in England

Abstract: An educational divide has characterized much of Britain's formal education system, and the cultures that derive from it, and adult educators have done, and continue to do much of their work to overcome it. This paper explores how that divide has shaped learning cultures in England.

Key words: learning culture, educational divide, adult educators.

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment, under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land.

Raymond Williams

Great Britain had in its heyday an education system fit for purpose for a society with two 'great' tasks. The first, evident mainly in the nineteenth century, was the administration of a large empire with a smattering of civil servants, and a few military officers backed in the main by locally recruited, or conscripted, soldiers, and the odd gun boat. The second, in the first half of the 20th century involved the oversight of Taylorist forms of mass production.

Both tasks involved a small number of people making decisions affecting very large numbers. For these people, education was expected to produce above all confident and assured decision takers; people with clarity about strategy; well read, with a clear sense of values; and people not easily intimidated. For the rest,

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education needed to instill a work ethic, a sense of discipline, enough skill to perform the tasks required of them, and not much more. For the few, education led the way to blue skies, a future where anything might be possible. For the rest, the prospect of a life of hard work, for, as the philosopher Bertrand Russell put it: Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first kind is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid.

This thinking shaped the development of learning cultures in Britain over centuries, but especially in England (since the Scots had a more democratic approach to education, and devolved responsibility for it, long before there was a Scottish Parliament). Elites enjoyed private education (public schools) and universities, where the learning was soaked up in the milieu as much as in the classroom. By contrast, there was a grudging extension of public education for the masses, accompanied always by concerns that if the poor should read and write they might get above themselves.

A further feature of this dichotomy has been the sharp distinction drawn between academic and vocational study – with the former privileged. It is a distinction that has not served Britain well. Since the industrial revolution respect for craft and craftsmanship, central to learning in a pre-industrial era, was now located outside the formal education system, as experienced skilled workers passed on their trades to apprentices. It was a system that sent most people into a narrow job –related direction, but at the same time awarded low status to vocational studies.

This educational divide between the few and the many was reflected in the 1944 Education Act, which shaped the institutional structures of post-war secondary education. This provided for grammar schools, where one in five of the population, selected by examination at the age of eleven, would be exposed to the humanities and sciences in much the same way as the public schools; and the other eighty percent would be prepared for the labour market, in secondary modern schools.

From the 1960s, with greater prosperity, the growth of the middle class, and as the nature of work changed, too, there was a steady move away from this binary approach to education – to create comprehensive schools. At the same time, higher education expanded – from just 6 percent of young people attending university in the late 1960s to 43% today.

Whilst for the products of grammar schools, then, education offered a route to social mobility for the clever children of the working class, for the main bulk of the population it confirmed the existing class order of things.

It is against that background that adult education has developed in the UK. Of course education is not only shaped by the state or by its most powerful citizens. At the same time there was a consistent strain of radical opposition to the prevailing wind, a determination among people to assert that mass education for all is the way to a just and humane society. This strand of adult education, organized by freely associating groups of adults, learning together to give dignity and richness to their lives is perhaps the bedrock of what the Workers' Educational Association used to call 'this great movement of ours.'

The heated debates about the future organisation of British society generated by radical groups such as the Levellers in the seventeenth century, by the coffee house debates of the eighteenth century, and by the temperance movement, each led to new forms of association, and were developed and used widely to enrich people's learning and their quality of life. Through the mutual improvement societies and independent lending libraries of the nineteenth century, through the women's movement and the green alliances of more recent times, people have come to new forms of organisation, new subjects for learning and refreshed relations between learning and democratic action.

Often their energies have led to the establishment of structured organisations. Trades Unions, co-operative societies, women's institutes and non-conformist religious groups were formed first for people to address challenges their members shared in common, and grew to offer a wide range of opportunities for learning and development for the communities they served.

The breadth and vibrancy of voluntary and community organisations are testament to the resilience of that tradition. All play a role in offering practical learning in democracy, as well as opportunities for people to develop skills, knowledge understanding and capacity, and to contribute to the wider welfare of society.

Raymond Williams, the cultural critic and adult educator, wrote that at times of social change, people came together to learn to understand change, to adapt to it, and to shape it. This voluntary movement created a culture of learning where the desire to change the world was inextricably linked to the desire to learn – exactly the connection in another continent, and more recently, Paulo Freire meant when he spoke of adult literacy as a tool for reading the world as well as just reading words, important as that is.

A second strand of provision for the education of adults developed at the end of the nineteenth century and flowered up to the end of the twentieth in the university extension movement, created by socially conscious academics who wanted to bring the fruits of university scholarship, and the rigour of serious enquiry to working people previously denied access to them. R. H. Tawney, the

economic historian, played a key role in the development and spread of university tutorial classes. His approach to teaching working class students, which was radical in its day, was described by an observer, Mrs. Stocks: He talked to them as man to man, neither claiming authority nor asking for unquestioned agreement. But as he talked, the breadth and quality of his mind and the meticulous accuracy of his scholarship reflected itself in the work of his students and established the standard of their thought. (Stocks, 39)

Just as well, given the confidence of students, like J. M. Mactavish, an early member of the Workers' Educational Association, and a shipwright from Portsmouth. At a conference in Oxford in 1907, called to discuss 'What Oxford can do for Workpeople', Mactavish argued: I am not here as a suppliant for my class. I decline to sit at the rich man's gate praying for crumbs. I claim for my class all the best of all that Oxford has to give. (Mansbridge in Kelly, 227)

A third strand of adult education activity developed along with the expansion of local government. This saw the consolidation of a national system of public libraries and museums in many towns and cities. It saw too the development of classes in dressmaking, boot repair, cookery and physical education as people sought to stretch tight budgets. In a 1926 report of the Board of Education, explained that given how little access to learning many people had, the challenge was to find 'any common interest which could serve as a basis, or even a starting point, for any educational effort.' The result was a flowering of courses in physical education, pigeon fancying, horticulture, amateur wireless (what we now call radio), and science. This was a strand of provision that grew impressively in the period following the Second World War, as a more affluent population sought opportunities for structured leisure time activity, until the resurgence of utilitarian policies cut back sharply on courses where adults might learn for the joy of it.

There was, in addition, night school – where people gained the qualifications they had missed out on at school. Night school complemented the tradition of apprenticeship training, where young people gained vocational skills in the workplace itself. At specialist institutions adults pursued systematic courses in order to consolidate their opportunities in the world of work. Over the years, the mainly vocational institutions that began as night schools became, further education colleges, or, for some, successively, Colleges of Advanced Technology, polytechnics and now universities, bringing with them a commitment to making access to learning for adults possible through the organisation of part-time and modular study.

In a famous essay Raymond Williams identifies three broad groups of educators in Britain. The first, Old Humanists think education is to do with values rather than practical applications. Alas they think education of this sort should

be limited to an elite. Second, the Industrial Trainers 'believe that the purpose of education is to fit people to earn their living'; they believe 'the most persuasive argument for the extension of education has still to be put in terms not of values but of competitive economies' and that it is best done young. (Williams, in McIlroy/Westwood, 227)

Neither the trainers nor the Old Humanists sees a significant role for adult learning. His third group, the Public Educators, say 'with Carlyle, that it is the first duty of government to see that the people can think', and thereby shape society. (Williams in McIlroy/Westwood 228)

Two groups believe this, Williams argues. The first believe the task is to bring culture to the poor; the second, to work alongside learners to shape a programme of studies that makes sense to them, starts from their experiences and addresses their own concerns. There was a strong commitment in the second of these groups to negotiate the curriculum with learners. This led to richly diverse learning experiences. All these groups are recognizable today among educators and policy makers.

By the end of the 1960s, it became clear that the mix of adult education provision on offer attracted learners who had already had the benefit of extended initial education. Working class people, and especially working class men, took little part. But there were significant other minorities excluded from provision – among them people with poor basic skills, people with disabilities and learning difficulties, migrants, offenders.

In 1975, a major national campaign to teach adults to read and write was launched, and given a huge boost by the decision of the BBC to put out 24 weeks of prime time television programmes in support of the campaign's aim to teach literacy and numeracy. The literacy campaign made a determined effort to make learners' experiences central to the process. The only materials then available were aimed at small children, so students dictated and edited powerful stories, which were published and used as the materials to generate new work. The literacy campaign linked with a worker writers' movement, determined to ensure that working people's histories and ideas were as freely available as those of the more frequently published sections of society.

A comparable initiative followed, offering English as a Second Language (now English for Speakers of Other Languages or ESOL) classes to adults who had migrated to Britain to take up jobs. In addition to the language components of these studies, ESOL classes offered the chance to make sense of life in Britain, how to get benefits, where to go to register with a doctor, and so on. But they also became the fulcrum for developing an understanding of what it meant for all of us to live in a multi-cultural, linguistically and culturally diverse society.

There was a major move to engage with people whose initial experience of schools made them believe that educational institutions were not for them. Outreach workers started groups in pubs and clubs, wherever people were comfortable to learn.

The rise of second generation feminism had an impact on curriculum and process alike, challenging both established pedagogy and epistemology, and providing a graphic example of how easy it is to write human effort and achievement out of our common narratives. There was an impact, too, with the development of the Access movement, which offered second chances to pursue higher education to people who missed out the first time round. For that movement to succeed, it was necessary to provide some order among the rich anarchy of adult learning opportunities in place. The Open College network, which was started by practitioners, developed a mechanism for learners to gain credit for their studies, long before there was official interest in credit accumulation and transfer.

Trade unions renewed interest in learning – first through shop steward and health and safety courses; then through more general educational initiatives. More recently unions have developed the role of union learning representatives, (now 20,000 strong), able to act as brokers, offering information and advice to their colleagues on re-engaging with learning.

Broadcasting has been a major influence on adult learning since the foundation of the BBC in the 1920s. A core part of its mission was to educate – and as a result educational and educative programming have been able to garner prime time slots – for programmes as varied as *The Blue Planet* (a study of oceanography) and *The People's War*, which generated an online archive of people's memories and reflections of life in the 1940s that engaged tens of thousands of participants. With the growth of new media, broadcasters have invented new forms of association and of promotion.

The single most innovative initiative of the post-war years, the creation of the Open University, which made effective use of television from the beginning. The Open University's influence on the learning culture of the country cannot be over-estimated. Since its inception, more than two million British adults have studied with the institution. In addition, through its link with broadcasting (and more recently in the use of the web and mobile technology) – another two million people a week were able to eavesdrop on the broadcast programmes integral to its studies. The Open University pioneered high quality distance learning materials, produced collectively by teams of experts. It gave a powerful impetus to the creation of modular, credit based studies, and showed conclusively that adult part-time study, undertaken at a distance, could be as rigorous and challenging as any full-time undergraduate programme. Its students are fiercely proud of the

institution, and when provoked are skilled at making their voices heard in political debates.

If much of the development since the 1960s re-asserted the link between adult education and social justice, the effect of policy, funding and institutional changes since the early 1990s have, not always intentionally, often served to weaken those links, and to create new divides.

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act separated adult education into well-funded provision leading to nationally recognised qualifications (or credits towards them), and much-less well funded, locally organised uncertificated provision. This led to many providers scrambling to turn French or art classes into certificated provision, to secure better and more secure funding. This eroded the possibility of students negotiating the curriculum.

The new funding arrangements were backed by external inspection, to ensure that all providers receiving state money operated to a common standard. This was a welcome enough aim, but had the effect of taking agency away from teachers and learners, and locating it in the dialogue between institutional managers, inspectors and funders. The net result was a weakening of links between structured adult education and the less formal learning activities of voluntary movements. Despite real gains for adults with disabilities, during these years, and despite significant expansion in investment overall, there was a reduction in innovation, as providers were steered more and more towards the achievement of national targets designed to secure a more skilled workforce.

In the late 1990s this process was to an extent reversed with the new Labour Government, which launched a breathtaking variety of new initiatives to kick start a lifelong learning culture. Among them was the creation of a University for Industry (now 'learndirect'), the latest in a number of attempts to parallel the achievements of the Open University by creating an e-learning based institution offering less advanced studies. The government funded innovative initiatives to widen access and participation; and it launched Individual Learning accounts, which put money into the pockets of learners willing to take up learning, until fraudulent private providers found a way to exploit the budget, and put an end to a successful innovation.

However, there is always a pendulum in public policy affecting adult learners, between a desire to make learning accessible to all, and a utilitarian anxiety, that with not enough money to go round, there should be clear priority given to provision that directly benefits the labour market. After 1993, whilst the snowstorm of initiatives continued, they were all now focused on improving skills in the workplace, as Skills Strategy after Skills Strategy was published. Money was

diverted from adult education open to anyone to provision organized with employers on employers' premises.

The catch was that such provision needed to lead to a particular nationally recognised qualification years whether or not it met employers' or workers' needs. There were, of course, successes – notably in involving more people over the age of 45 in learning. But there were widespread weaknesses – public money displaced money employers previously spent themselves; there was too little money to do a rigorous job in many circumstances.

For providers who saw a role for adult learning beyond that envisaged by Williams' Industrial Trainers, these years have involved ingenuity in bending budgets to more generous purposes. For people outside the education industry there has been a re-assertion of the role learning can play in autonomous civil society organisations.

More recently there has been a resurgence of interest in the voluntary and community sector, and in informal learning, with new confidence in libraries and museums that they have a key contribution to make to lifelong learning, and the new government, elected in May believes that 'philistinism is bad economics' and that adult learning of all sorts matters. The pendulum is swinging again – if only modestly at a time of major cuts in funding.

Where does this leave learning cultures in England? Well, NIACE's regular annual surveys of participation show that Helena Kennedy's 1997 judgment, 'If at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed', is true still for far too many people. Almost everyone recognises that learning can make a positive difference to your life, your job, your children's chances, and to your health, physical and mental, but still a quarter of the adult population think it is not for the likes of me. New technologies enrich the lives of active learners – with 2 million regular users of material on iTunes U, and a self-help culture on YouTube where you can learn anything from guitars to gardening. If you work for a large firm, or in a field involving technological change, you will surely get more chances to learn at work than your parents had. But public spaces for understanding change, adapting to it and shaping it have shrunk over this decade. That kind of adult education does go on, especially informally, for example in the sustainability movement, but in publicly funded work it feels more like guerrilla activity than a core dimension of adult education in a democratic and diverse society.

So, whilst the picture is a complex one there are still too many ways in which for the educationally privileged the sky is the limit, whilst for the educationally excluded opportunities are too often focused only on employability. It is, as ever, the task of adult educators to narrow the gap between the two.

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Plavo nebo, plavi radnički mantil: kulture učenja u Engleskoj

Apstrakt: Veliki deo britanskog obrazovnog sistema karakteriše obrazovni jaz. Kulture koje iz njega proizilaze kao i nastavnici u obrazovanju odraslih su već učinili mnogo toga i nastaviće da posvećuju deo svog rada njihovom prevazilaženju. Ovaj rad istražuje kako su podele oblikovale kulture učenja u Engleskoj.

Ključne reči: kultura učenja, obrazovni jaz, nastavnici u obrazovanju odraslih.

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