

"Jesus and History, and Thunder and Lightning":

The case for life-wide learning.

Inaugural Professorial Lecture, 7 October 2015

University of Wolverhampton.

More than twenty five years ago, I was appointed Director (later renamed Chief Executive in the title inflation of the times) of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, and one of my first tasks was to supervise a national research project, led by Jeannie Sutcliffe that explored learning provision offered to adults with learning difficulties. Along with pockets of inspiring initiatives, which involved students as partners she found that all too often there was little or no choice, and the narrowest curriculum range. One student, when asked why she had dropped out of a literacy class, replied – ‘Well I have done next week’s worksheet each year for 13 years’. By contrast, Sutcliffe described an interview where the provider was seeking to match students’ interests with appropriate provision – expecting to be asked by the student, a man with significant learning difficulties, for the chance to study art, woodwork or keep fit, only to be told, ‘I want to study Jesus and History, and Thunder and Lightning’. (Sutcliffe, 1990, 142).

The phrase has stayed with me, both because it highlighted the breadth of curiosity adults of all kinds give voice to when given the chance, and because it offers a benchmark against which to measure the range and depth of opportunities adults are afforded today, with its concern to understand the scientific and ethical underpinning of the lives we lead; and because it illustrates the importance of avoiding pigeon- holing people: of listening, to echo a phrase of Bob Dylan’s, not just to what we think they need, but to exactly what they want.

Adult learning matters. It can transform lives, fire new enthusiasms and satisfy old curiosities. It can be a route to gain or maintain employment, and the means to sustain livelihood. It can offer second chances to people who missed out in their earlier education, and first chances to people who never had the chance to go to school. It offers opportunities for people to rub shoulders with others from all

backgrounds – and to strengthen social capital (Baron, Field & Schuller, 2001). There is powerful evidence that adult learning has positive health effects, prolongs active life and shortens the period of morbidity. Participation in adult education is recognised as an effective preventative health measure for people at risk of mental illness, and a safe place to rebuild relationships when recovering (HMSO, 2008). Adults who learn have a positive impact on their families, too: in what the American academic Tom Sticht called a double duty dollar. Teach an adult, but especially a mother, and children will learn better, too (Sticht, 2001).

But as well as offering the potential for transformation, adult learning provision can, without effective targeting, reinforce inequality, and the marginalisation of marginalised groups. There is a wealth of evidence of the social and economic value of adult learning, and evidence aplenty of how to overcome the exclusion of marginalised groups.

Yet we are currently facing the eradication of publicly funded adult education services, a dramatic weakening of public libraries, and more than a third of further education colleges are already in financial crisis – with major additional cuts imminent. Two million adult learners in further education have been lost since 2003, and provision is reducing dramatically. The situation for adults in higher education is no better: the increase in student fees has led to a thirty percent drop in Open University student numbers, along with a marked decline in other part-time higher education participation by mature students at both undergraduate and postgraduate course level at a time when higher education as a whole is growing significantly. Adults seeking to change direction in mid-career, or to sustain their employment through acquiring complementary skills, face the equally bizarre ELQ (equivalent or lower level qualifications) rule – where no funding support is available for study at the same or at a lower level than a learner's existing highest qualification. At the same time we have seen a reduction in workplace training – with fewer employers offering training now than before the onset of the recession. (LSC, 2008, UKCES 2014).

All too often, public policy affecting adult learners in this country is fragmentary and unstable, and financing short term, or non-existent. Feast is followed by prolonged famine: central policy imperatives distort local responsiveness; and when genuinely popular initiatives take off, they are all too quickly closed down – for fear that they will cost too much. In an economy reliant upon migrant labour, and with large numbers of settled residents without the English language skills to participate fully in work and society, we have again slashed the English for Speakers of Other Languages budgets. Demographic change means that we have a labour market reliant on older workers prolonging their working lives, yet we limit public support for learning to the young, and to securing 3 million apprentices by 2020, when just 6 percent of young people take the apprenticeship route when leaving school.

Yet in its *Skills Outlook* the Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation, reporting on its study of the literacy, numeracy and information-processing skills of adults between the ages of 16-65 concluded that ‘the results...underline the need to move from a reliance on initial education towards fostering lifelong skills-oriented learning.’ (OECD, 2013, 42).

I agree with the OECD analysis as far as it goes, as for that matter have governments across the political spectrum in England for the last decade - at least at the level of rhetoric. But my agreement comes with one important caveat. We certainly do need skills-oriented opportunities to learn throughout life, but we need learning, too, to fulfil our wider aspirations, to foster our capacities, and to strengthen the possibilities adult learning offers as a catalyst in the achievement of other social policy goals. David Blunkett put it well in his Preface to the 1998 government policy paper, ‘*The Learning Age*’. Having highlighted our proud tradition in Britain, of men and women combining together to learn their way out of poverty, and to build through self-help mutual societies, trade unions, and civic institutions

of learning, (like the mechanics' institutes that Wolverhampton University grew from), Blunkett went on:

Learning enables people to play a full part in their community and strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us 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 (DFEE, 1998, 5).

In this lecture I want to argue that we do indeed need skills focused life-long learning, but even more importantly we need life-wide learning in order that we can become the best, together, that we can be. And without that broader vision, the narrower labour market focused strategy will fail, as it is failing now in England. But first, I want to explore how we have arrived at our present situation.

Adult learning policy

The development of educational opportunities for adults through much of the Twentieth Century happened in the main through local development, with spasms of State interventions. In the aftermath of the First World War government funded universities and the WEA and put in place regulations enabling local authority provision. In the Second World War government set up the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, to 'keep the soldier alert with a view to increasing his military efficiency' and 'to maintain his morale' (Haining, cited in Broad, 124). After the war, following a tripling of extra mural provision, Florence Horsburgh, Minister for Education announced a modest cut in universities' adult education funding. The TUC wrote to the Prime Minister to complain. Prefiguring Jeremy Corbyn's approach to Cabinet solidarity, Winston Churchill replied:

There is, perhaps no branch of our vast educational system which should more attract within its particular sphere the aid and encouragement of the State than adult education. How many must there be in Britain, after the disturbance of two destructive wars, who thirst in later life to learn about the humanities, the

history of their country, the philosophies of the human race, and the arts and letters which sustain and are borne forward by the ever-conquering English language? This ranks in my opinion far above science and technical instruction, which are well sustained and not without their merits in our present system. The mental and moral outlook of free men studying the past with free minds in order to discern the future demands the highest measures which our hard pressed finances can sustain. I have no doubt myself that a man or woman earnestly seeking in grown-up life to be guided to wide and suggestive knowledge in its largest and most uplifted sphere will make the best of all the pupils in this age of clatter and buzz, of gape and gloat. The appetite of adults to be shown the foundations and processes of thought will never be denied by a British Administration cherishing the continuity of our Island life. (Ministry of Education, 1954, 66-7)

The cut was reversed! Perhaps, though, the single most significant expansion of adult opportunity derived from the establishment of the Open University in 1969.

But apart from these interventions, and the occasional policy commission (Ashby in 1954, Russell in 1973, Hoggart's ACACE report in 1982), government left the education of adults to local providers, and decisions about curriculum to professionals. Major initiatives like the national adult literacy campaign of the 1970s sprung from the voluntary sector, backed by the BBC; ESOL work grew from local authority routes; Access courses opening routes to higher education for adults were developed by polytechnics. (Ministry of Education 1954, DES, 1973, ACACE, 1982).

The changes that led to the nationalisation of policy, and the increasingly narrow focus on courses with an explicit utilitarian labour market value derived from two sources. First, Jim Callaghan's 1977 speech at Ruskin College raised concerns about standards and the liberalism of curricular and organisational arrangements in schools, unleashing debate and initiatives culminating in Ken Baker's Education Reform Act and the adoption of National Targets for Education and Training in 1988. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992,

weakened the role of local authorities, 'freeing' (or nationalising?) colleges, and turning polytechnics into universities, as well as nationalising qualifications bearing adult education funding. At the same time, the independence of HMI was ended, and the new FEFC inspectors were charged with a radically different balance of inspection and development than their predecessors, with a focus on measuring success in easily auditable judgements.

This process connected, eventually, with the second change- where post-compulsory education came to be seen as a subsidiary contributor to wider economic policy, with the Treasury exercising increasing control over its strategic direction. But before this second process took hold in the early 2000s, a combination of circumstances created a flowering of life-wide as well as life-long learning initiatives, stimulated by State action in the 1990s.

In 1993, inspired by Jacques Delors, its President, the European Commission published a White Paper which argued that economic prosperity and social cohesion were both enhanced by lifelong learning (CEC 1993); launching debates in the European Union that embraced vocational and community education, which quickened during the European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996, and culminated in the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 (European Council of Ministers 2000). The accession of Sweden, Denmark and Finland had a positive effect on policies affecting community based learning, as could be seen from the Union's Grundtvig programme.

1996 also saw the publication of two major reports on lifelong learning. Building on the 1972 Edgar Faure report *Learning to Be*, a UNESCO committee, once again chaired by Delors, produced *Learning: The Treasure Within*, with its four pillars of learning:

- learning to know
- learning to do
- learning to be (I would say to become)
- and learning to live together. (Delors 1996).

Delors' analysis in the UNESCO report was grounded in a human rights focus, in which the key responsibility of a lifelong learning system is to support people in the full realisation of their capacities. To borrow from Carlyle, it saw 'the first duty of government to see that the people can think.' Delors' expansive and inclusive humanistic vision informed the 1997 World Conference on the Education of Adults in Hamburg (CONFINTEA V) which further drew attention to the way in which learning had an impact on work, health, longevity and well-being, on creativity and trust. Its vision was similar to that of Raymond Williams who argued in 1958 that at times of social change, adults turn to learning in order to understand what is happening, to adapt to change, and most importantly to shape it. Or as Paulo Freire put it, the task is reading the world, not just the word. (UNESCO, 1997, Williams 1993 (1958), Freire 1975)

The second major report came from the OECD. *Lifelong learning for all* (OECD, 1996) was a joint communique between OECD ministers of labour and education. It linked adult learning to human capital formation, recognising that people's skills were an increasingly important driver of economic prosperity. OECD followed up with a raft of systematic studies of adult learning and education, and the exploration of links between lifelong learning and the labour market. As Kjell Rubenson notes, over time, the human capital focus that underpins OECD's analysis has come to be accepted as the norm in much of the industrial world, and as we shall see especially in Britain, and increasingly in development education thinking as well, (Rubenson, 2015).

The energy generated by these reports crossed party lines. Gillian Shephard, the Tory Secretary of State in 1996 became convinced of the value of learning cities as her government adopted lifelong education policies. Coming into office the successor Labour government received five key reports on domestic policy at or just after it took office in 1997. The Dearing Report on higher education highlighted among the four purposes of higher education, to 'create civic and inclusive societies'. Helena Kennedy's report on further education, '*Learning Works*' included her analysis of the weakness of the UK education system: 'If at first you don't succeed you don't succeed', and made a

powerful case for widening participation to people failed by initial schooling. Also reporting on further education, and the challenges it faced in making provision for people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, the Tomlinson report *Inclusive Learning* made a persuasive case that it was the system not the learner that needed to make necessary adaptations to secure learners' right to learn. Josh Hillman's report, *The University for Industry* led to the creation of a distance and blended learning institution, and, finally the Fryer Report (NAGCELL) advised the Secretary of State on lifelong learning policies directly. (Dearing, 1997, Kennedy, 1997, Tomlinson, 1996, Hillman 1996, NAGCELL, 1997)

A glance at the content of *The Learning Age* following on from the vision of David Blunkett's Preface cited above shows how far a narrow utilitarian human capital focus was already shaping the thinking of his Department. However, the great flowering of policy initiatives the Labour government introduced (which included individual learning accounts; neighbourhood learning development, and a national literacy numeracy and ESOL strategy) was broad and inclusive, and drew strongly, not only on the UNESCO vision, and that of the domestic reports, but on Blunkett's own lived experience.

He was not alone among politicians in recognising the power of learning adults undertake for their own purposes. John Denham recognised the value of self-help learning in enriching lives, particularly of older adults; John Hayes, a Conservative minister, the value of craft, of people making culture making things. In his first speech following the 2010 election, Vince Cable spoke movingly of the impact participation in adult education classes had had on the life of his mother, in offering a place to rebuild dignity and a sense of purpose after debilitating illness, and of the route it offered to his father to become a college lecturer, sharing his engineering skills. And in the 2010 spending round Cable defended community based learning budgets with determination, and at least in the immediate term, success. (Hayes, 2010, Boseley 2015).

Despite these ringing endorsements of the value of learning for its own sake, and despite the inclusion of community based adult education

alongside vocational further education in the remit of the Learning and Skills Council, which was set up in 2002, Blunkett's inspiring vision was lost within months of his departure from Education to the Home Office. The chair and leadership of the new LSC reinterpreted their remit to the detriment of life-wide learning. The influence of the Treasury increased significantly: testing, target setting and inspection regimes increased, and each year a new Skills Strategy was published. It was unsurprising, perhaps, that politicians soon argued that 'we don't want to pay for willow weaving on the taxes', or under-water basket weaving, or tap dancing... the examples were legion, and often acted as a smokescreen for cutting literacy and ESOL provision. One of Blunkett's successors, Alan Johnson explained cuts in community based adult education in this way:

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, 2006).

It is a powerful argument, fuelled by the particular challenges facing the British economy, but before examining what informed Johnson's view, I can't resist repeating a story Tom Wilson, the TUC director of **unionlearn**, and a visiting fellow here, told at the time. Tom was having plumbing work done in his house, and asked why plumbers don't take on apprentices. The plumber answered that as soon as the apprentices qualified they became competition, but that plumbers did engage apprentices some time after they reached forty, when getting underneath the bath to reach pipes became harder. 'But I don't need to', concluded the plumber, 'because I do pilates!'

To return to Alan Johnson's view, it was clear that ministers and officials now accepted the primacy of the OECD human capital approach to lifelong learning. Education was simply seen as a mechanism for economic modernisation. The UK government, as

elsewhere in Europe, clearly recognised that economic competitiveness requires skilled and flexible workers for three key reasons.

Firstly we need them because of changes in the global economy. We live in what Gita Sen calls a fierce new world, where the combination of economic restructuring, disruptive technologies, communications transformations, and political instabilities have created a situation where we are to use Charlie Leadbetter's graphic phrase, 'living on thin air' (Sen, 2012, Leadbetter, 1999).

Outside the extractive industries (which are quite clearly tied to place), commodities can be designed in Italy, produced in Viet Nam, shipped by a Panamanian freighter, financed from London, advertised in New York, and show profits in the Cayman Islands; and where any one of the elements in the chain can shift at extremely short notice to another low cost venue on another continent. For industrial societies, it is high skilled work that can compete in these markets, offering high levels of reward to globally mobile workers.

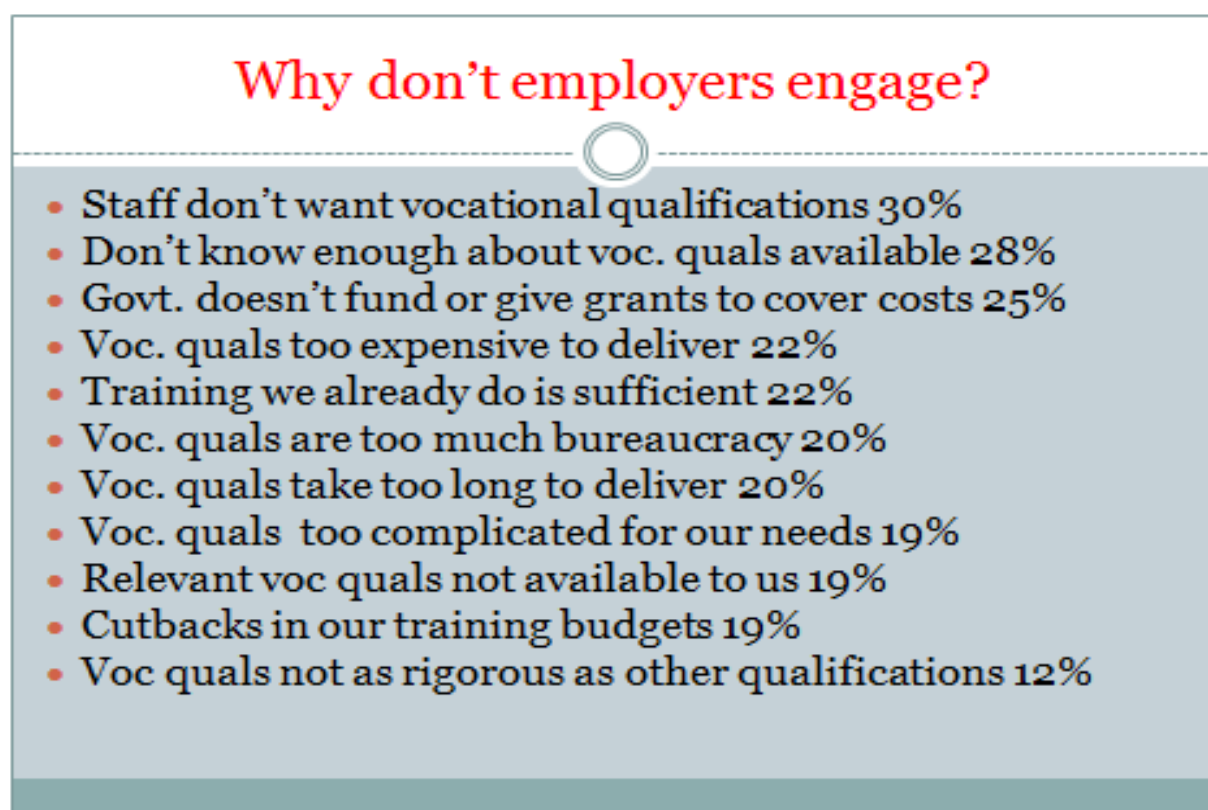
Secondly, the power of national governments to manage these forces has lessened significantly, when capital has global freedoms unmatched by common regulatory systems. However, there has in most industrialised countries been an ever greater focus on sectors where high levels of skill are required, and, unlike in England, a move away from education systems focused exclusively on the education of the young. Indeed, as I mentioned above, the evidence of the value of learning beyond school was underlined emphatically in the OECD's *Skills Outlook*. It remarked that 'at the country level there is a clear relationship between the extent of participation in organised **adult** learning activities and average proficiency in key information-sharing activities' (*author's emphasis* OECD, 2013, 24) It noted, too, that adults maintain and enhance key information- related skills better from learning undertaken outside the workplace. Treasury thinking here, however, concentrated more on the greater rate of return possible from investment in the young .

Third, Alan Johnson, like his predecessors and successors, faced the fact that employers in the UK undertake less training than their continental competitors, a situation exacerbated by Labour policies

between 2003 and 2010 – where the Train to Gain programme, which displaced funding for adults in colleges learning the things they want to learn in order to pay employers for offering training to their employees. It was a truly bizarre initiative – with government officials desperate to hit targets persuading Tesco’s that the government would pay for initial training that up to then Tesco had funded itself. Other employers pulled down funding for qualifications that merely confirmed employees’ existing skills. In the worst year ninety percent of the funding was deadweight – public funding that merely displaced private funding. Hardly surprising then, that the current apprenticeship programme runs the same risks.

The UK Commission on Employment and Skills surveyed employers in 2012 to discover why they were resistant to training, and the answers were illuminating:

Table 1



Government policy has from 2003 been pretty single-mindedly focused on vocational qualifications, and these are undoubtedly of key importance in securing a job initially, and of some significance when

changing jobs. What is clear from the chart, however, is that they loom less large in employers' plans for workers already in post.

If things became tough for adult learners under Labour, they have got worse since. The 2015 Eurostat report on adult participation in formal and non-formal education showed that twenty of the twenty eight EU countries reported significant increases between 2009 and 2014. Alas, the UK reported the most significant fall over the same period:

Table 2

Participation in education and training last 4 weeks 2009 and 2014 - selected countries 16-64s (%)

	2009	2014
EU28	9.1	10.7
UK	20.1	15.8
Switzerland	23.9	31.7
Sweden	22.2	28.9
Finland	22.1	25.1
Netherlands	17.0	17.8
France	5.7*	18.6

The base of French reporting changed 2009-2014. (Eurostat, 2015).

In part the UK figures can be explained by the evidence from employers' own surveys that training provided by their firms is at lower levels than before the onset of the 2007/8 recession:

Table 3

% of employers training staff over the last 12 months/ offering off-site training

2003	59	n/a
2004	64	47

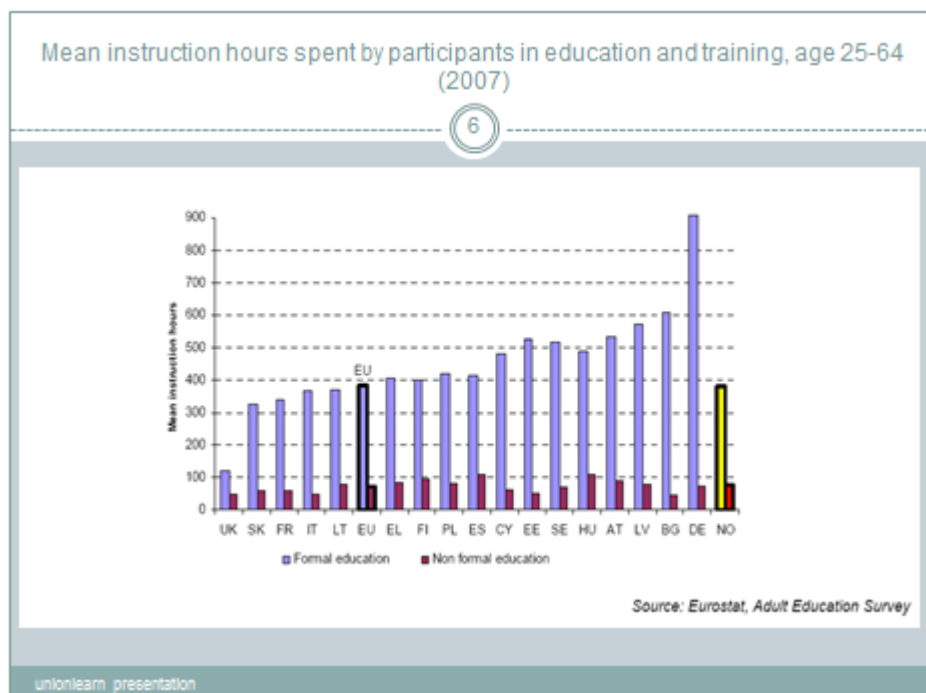
2005	65	46
2007	67	46
2014	58	45

(LSC 2008, 3, UKCES 2014, 56)

But they also result from the radical reductions of publicly funded learning opportunities for adults successive governments have implemented in the last decade as Treasury orthodoxy and austerity policies combined, and from their surely unintended actions in persuading employers that training is something the State should pay for.

Meanwhile, the UK bumps along the bottom of all the EU countries in the length of training time offered to individual workers (see Chart 2). If induction and statutory health and safety courses are stripped out, the volume of training, particularly among small and medium sized enterprises lags even further behind European competitors.

Chart 1



In addition, where the opportunity to train is offered it is skewed heavily in favour of higher paid and already well qualified workers. As the Eurostat Adult Education Survey of 2011, which interviewed individuals about participation over a full year shows, the more education you have already had, the more you get later:

Table 4

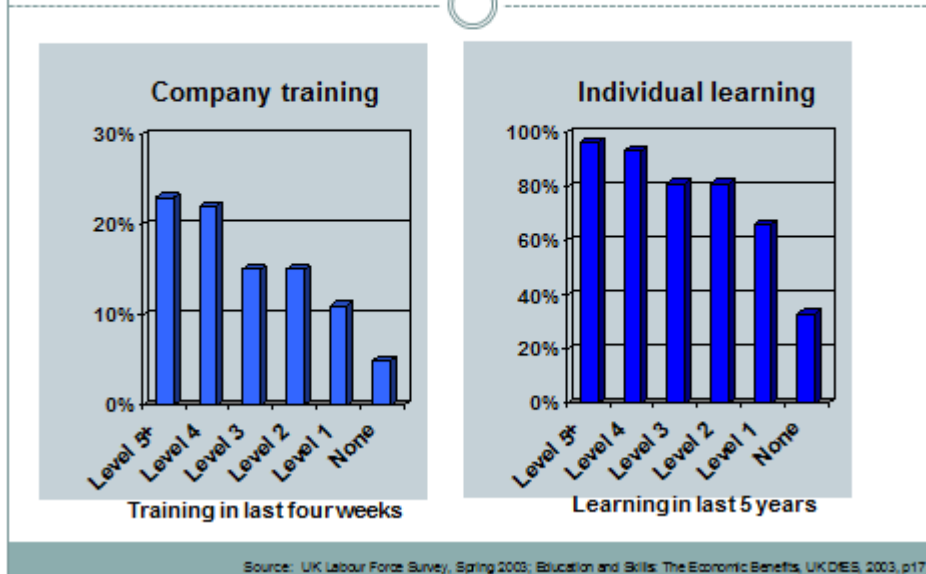
Participation in formal or non-formal learning over the last year, by level of prior educational achievement; UK data (%)

UK 16-54s	35.8	
Formal	14.8	
Non-formal	24.3	
Lower secondary (ISCED 0-2)	17.9	
Upper secondary (ISCED 3-4)	33.5	
Tertiary (ISCED 5-6)	45.8	(Eurostat 2015)

An earlier UK Labour Force study showed, too, that those with least formal skills not only get much less company training; they are also much less likely to take up learning independently:

Chart 2

The less skilled get less later



To add to the gloom, and perhaps most worryingly for policy in this country OECD found that England/Northern Ireland (UK) is among the three highest-performing countries in literacy when comparing 55-65 year-olds; but among the bottom three countries when comparing literacy proficiency among 16-24 year-olds (OECD, 2013 p.31); and that the younger cohort is no better prepared for the skill demands of the modern workplace than the older adults preparing to leave work. It is important to my argument to note that the 16-24s went through their whole education career under the centralised regime of a national curriculum, regular testing, and an inspection regime seeking compliance with government priorities.

So far, the focus of this discussion has been on government policy interventions, with their overwhelming focus on qualification bearing courses and their impact as measured by surveys. However, a 2008 representative survey undertaken for NIACE and Alan Felstead and colleagues highlighted that people preferred to learn on the job. Taking a course came long after trial and error, asking a colleague or the employer:

Chart 3

How people like to study at work

Sources of learning to improve job performance, 2007

	Very or quite helpful %	Of some help %	Of little or no help %
Learning as acquisition			
Training courses paid for by your employer or yourself	54	20	24
Using skills and abilities acquired outside of work	42	29	28
Drawing on the skills you picked up while studying for a qualification	45	21	31
Reading books, manuals and work-related magazines	39	24	50
Using the Internet	29	18	50
Learning as participation			
Doing your job on a regular basis	82	13	5
Being shown by others how to do certain activities or tasks	62	23	13
Watching and listening to others while they carry out their work	56	26	16
Reflecting on your performance	53	30	15
Using trial and error on the job	38	27	33

Base: all employees (2,076)

(Felstead et al 2004)

It is worth recognising that these preferences sit powerfully alongside the work of Lorna Unwin and Alison Fuller that explore the distinction between expansive workplaces, which value autonomy of decision making, reflection, and agency among workers, as against restrictive workplaces where to use the language of an earlier industrial era, workers are hired 'hands', and what is required is to follow the rules. What Felstead and Unwin point to, as do Lave and Wenger in their work on Communities of Practice is the need for workplaces to foster a culture of learning – and that can best be done by fostering learning and curiosity of all sorts. Current policies fail to foster that culture not least because they are too narrowly focused on utilitarianism and on

auditable, short-term outcomes (Unwin and Fuller, 2003, Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The Ford EDAP programme offers a vivid illustration of how wider learning can have positive effects on the workplace. The initiative, negotiated by Ford's unions as part of the 1987 pay bargaining round, agreed a sum of £50 per worker (0.3% of the wage bill) to provide a fund for which workers could apply to undertake any kind of study other than industrial training, which was the company's responsibility. The programme was managed at plant level, by representatives of blue collar and white collar unions and by management. Workers took golf lessons, learned to drive, learned plastering. Within 3 years they were doing OU degrees. In a company with a long history of demarcation disputes and poor industrial relations, and where the two yearly wage round regularly ended in a major strike, there was evidence of greater willingness to accept new procedures; absenteeism rates dropped, turn-over of staff dropped, too, and pay rounds were negotiated without a strike. Other companies in the motor trade copied the scheme, as did my organisation, NIACE, and as Ford's staff numbers reduced, staff and management agreed to hold on to EDAP as a priority. (Moore, 1994)

More recently, the success of **unionlearn**, which has recruited 30,000 workers as learning representatives, offering peer advice to colleagues on learning options, and negotiating with management on the learning needs of the workforce highlights the benefits of engaging workers in the design, planning and delivery of learning in and for the workforce. Like in Ford, the impact of **unionlearn** has been beneficial far beyond the acquisition of vocational skills. Here, as in community education, learning leaks – and the skills you gain in one context can be applied in others. (see <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/>)

Wider benefits of adult learning

Since the establishment of the Centre for Wider Benefits of Learning at Birkbeck and the Institute of Education (now UCL/IOE), and since OECD developed the work internationally, there has been widespread interest in securing evidence of the impact of participation in adult learning on other social policy issues. A government research report in

2012 summarised the benefits that could be measured , concluding that the largest impact was on health and well-being, with a more modest influence on civic participation. It summarised findings under five headings:

Mental health and wellbeing

Improvements in reported life satisfaction and happiness

Improvements in self-confidence (especially for formal learning)

This is more than twice the impact of being employed

Improvements in own perceptions of self-worth

Reductions in self-reported depression

Increases in satisfaction with social life

Increases in satisfaction with use of one's leisure time

Physical health

Reductions in the number of visits to a GP

This is about one-seventh of the impact of being employed

Improvements in self-reported overall health satisfaction

This is about half of the impact of being employed

Family and parenting

Increases in the probability that the children in the household speak more frequently with the mother about serious issues

Civic participation

Increases in trade union membership (especially for formal adult learning)

Greater involvement in voluntary work (for formal learning only)

Attitudes and behaviours

Greater desire to find a better job (especially for informal learning)

Improved financial expectations (especially for formal learning) (BIS,2012).

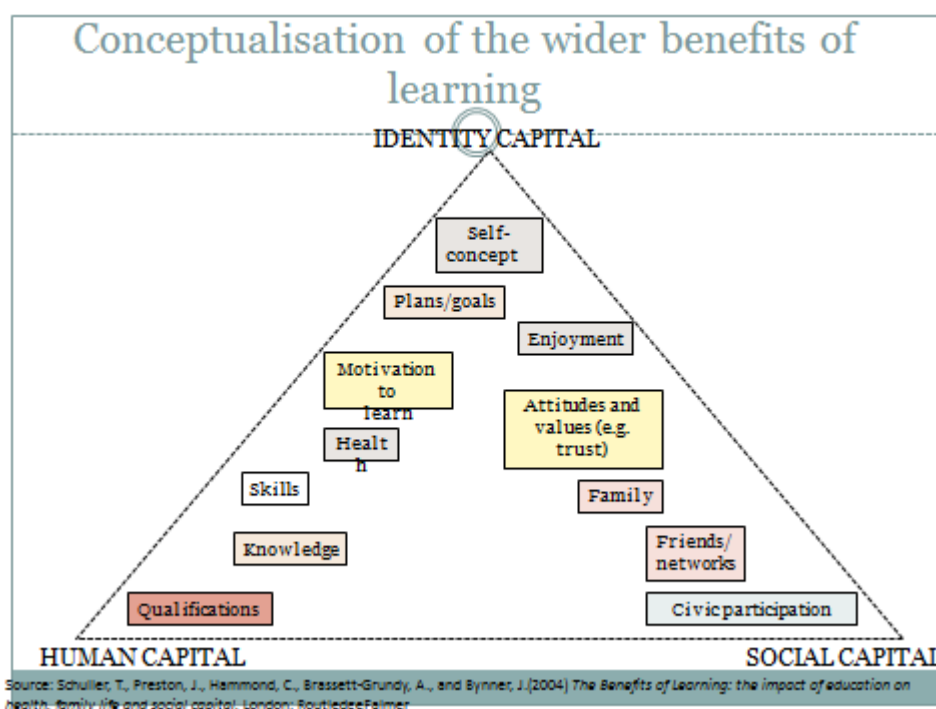
To bring these figures to life, a Derbyshire care home reported that following the introduction of classes, including exercise classes, there was a 75% drop in the use of incontinence pads, and a 50% drop in in-day medication. In their findings drawn from the British birth cohort studies the Wider Benefits of Learning centre discovered that people who had taken up classes were 13% more likely to give up smoking than their peers. The figures relating to racial tolerance are more graphic. No one I know ever joined an art class in order to become more racially tolerant, yet evidence drawn from the British longitudinal cohort studies shows that when compared with people of a similar age who report no participation in learning, and allowing for other variables, learners who have taken three or more classes over seven years show a 73% increase in racial tolerance (Feinstein et al, 2003). For people recovering from poor mental health classes offer a freely chosen option for rebuilding social contact, where the world doesn't fall down if you don't feel up to attending one week. The importance of learning in adult life was recognised in the government Foresight study in 2008, when it argued that learning was one of five key things to do each day to foster mental well-being. When I was a Principal in London it was apparent, too, that quite apart from the stimulus offered by affordable classes, they were a route for many to overcome isolation and loneliness.

The evidence poses significant challenges for government, since it operates in policy silos. If, as the evidence shows, participation in education secures improvements in health, both the health and further education ministries want provision to be made, but find it harder to decide from which budget the costs should be drawn. The power of silos should not be underestimated, as a senior civil servant reflected, when he commented to me that he knew no one whose career had been enhanced by securing a triumph for a minister in another department! However, quite apart from departmental budgets, the evidence is challenged, as I discovered when presenting to the Treasury, on the basis that the research shows a powerful association between participation and wider benefits, but does not show cast iron

causality. The same is, of course true of the relationship between qualifications and productivity – the only difference lying in the willingness or scepticism of decision makers to accept the evidence. It is, true, too, of the relationship between inspection and improving quality on a sustainable basis.

There are important lessons and important challenges posed by the wider benefits work. The key lesson is that you cannot be certain of the purposes of the learners, or of the benefits they derive, from the title of the courses they join. There is always an interplay between skills acquired, personal confidence and social engagement – captured well by Tom Schuller and his colleagues in this graphic in *The Benefits of Learning*:

Chart 4.



Inequality

The challenge arising from the Wider Benefits of Learning work is, though, a stark one. If learning is so beneficial, why do so many people decide that it is not for them? Opportunity, of course, plays its part. Whilst it is clear that skills have an impact on labour market success, access to learning at work is sharply differentiated, with people with fewer formal qualifications getting fewer opportunities to

learn at work. Negative experience at school plays its part, too. Success in learning early in life leads to reinforced success; and if you see learning as irrelevant to your life, there is a strong chance your children will, too.

NIACE's 2015 adult participation survey confirms the continuing power of Helena Kennedy's analysis I mentioned earlier, showing how those who regularly learn plan to carry on doing so, whilst less than one in five adults who say they have done no learning since school plan to take up learning in the future. The symmetry in the findings is striking, but it is important to remember that there is nothing inevitable about them:

Table 5

Future intentions to learn by current/recent engagement in learning (%)

	Likely to take up learning	Unlikely
Current learners	83	17
Current and recent learners	77	23
No learning last 3 years	23	77
None since school	17.5	82.5 (unpublished data)

In an earlier NIACE study, respondents who reported no learning since school recognised that taking part in learning made you feel better about yourself, and helped you help your children get on, but still didn't see it as 'for the likes of us.' (McGivney 1989)

Countries with market driven economic policies, and minimal regulation firmly in place, as in the UK and USA, experience sharply increased levels of inequality. As Wilkinson and Pickett demonstrate powerfully in *The Spirit Level* more unequal societies suffer poorer health, higher mortality rates, increased levels of crime, higher levels of social isolation, and lower levels of trust for rich and poor alike – all issues where learning has beneficial effects. And of course, they have

populations with sharply differentiated levels of educational experience and achievement, in which marginalised groups are significantly under-represented. (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

Table 6

Participation by social class

	Current/recent	3 years + ago	Not since school
Total	41	25	33
ABs	54	26	19
C1	52	24	23
C2	35	27	37
DE	26	23	50

(NIACE, 2015, unpublished data)

In the same way, participation is sharply differentiated by age group, with participation falling with each decade's demographic group. In *Learning through life*, the report of the independent Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning Schuller and Watson highlight four distinct, if overlapping phases of lifelong learning – up to 25, where people are undertaking more and more complex routes to labour market participation; 25-50, where a combination of job, family and social obligations make time for learning hard to find for many; 50-75, where adults begin disengagement from their main working lives, take on many of the responsibilities for maintaining civil society, and often have caring responsibilities for younger and older family members; and 75 plus, where later life brings its own distinct learning challenges. (Schuller and Watson, 2009)

It is striking how little current provision discriminates between the different aspirations and interests of these cohorts, which may be one reason for the extraordinary flowering of self-help provision by and for older adults already enthused by learning through the University of the Third Age groups across the country. NIACE picked up on the different interests of different age groups in its 2007 study *What Older People Learn*:

Table 6

What are older people learning?

All adults		45+		55+	
Computer skills	24.0	Computer skills	31.8	Computer skills	40.6
Business studies	8.1	Foreign languages	8.1	Foreign languages	10.2
Health & medicine	7.6	Business studies	6.5	Arts	7.2
Foreign languages	5.7	Health & medicine	6.3	History	4.7
Social work	3.5	Arts	5.0	Religion	4.5
Arts	3.1	History	3.9	Health & medicine	4.0
Engineering	3.0	Social work	3.9	Music	3.2
English lang/lit	3.0	Religion	3.8	Business studies	3.1
Social sciences	3.0	Occupational H&S	2.8	Social work	2.5
Science & maths	2.9	Communication	2.6	English lang/lit	2.3

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The same survey highlighted changes in the primary motivation to learn among adults.

Table 7

Motivation to learn

	45-54 %	55-64 %	65-74 %
Rising citation of motivation to learn			
I am interested in the subject/personal interest	30.6	42.4	51.1
I enjoy learning/it gives me pleasure	19.8	29.8	53.4
To improve my self confidence	11.6	13.3	13.8
To meet people	5.6	7.6	15.5
Falling citation of motivation to learn			
To help in my current job	38.6	25.1	8.0
To develop myself as a person	29.0	27.6	19.6
To get a recognised qualification	20.7	9.1	4.6
To make my work more satisfying	16.8	12.8	5.5

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(Aldridge and Tuckett, 2007).

One key measure in making learning accessible is responding to demand and interest. The astonishing range I found when I began work in 1973 at The Friends Centre, a liberal arts adult centre in Brighton did much to echo the range of curiosities Jeannie Sutcliffe's student spoke of. During my first week Glubb Pasha, the British General seconded to the Palestinians at the time of the 1948 partition, when the State of Israel was created, was explaining to some seventy learners, the background to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Upstairs classes on the nineteenth century novel sat alongside advanced Russian, and a WEA philosophy tutorial; a group were looking at the impact of planning on the urban environment, and pensioners were planning to paint the night away. Not much later, Allen Ginsberg and Yevgeny Yevtushenko led sessions reading and debating their poetry.

Municipal adult education offered a different blend of provision, with more craft based and hands on courses. In the 1980s, in London my ILEA Institute offered 'Taxi Drivers' Knowledge of London'; women's self-defence; woodwork for blind people; boxing (offered continuously in the same room at the same time since 1926); stained glass making (with perhaps two working class students alongside a dozen more affluent); and world championship level Latin American Dance classes.

The night school tradition, where adults who missed out at first undertook serious and systematic study to gain qualifications, was alive and thriving in further education colleges and polytechnics.

Universities accepted a civic responsibility to foster an informed population, and broadcasters fulfilled their duty to inform as well as educate and inform with flair. Libraries, and the advent of cheap paperbacks also contributed.

And yet, still, these services succeeded better at meeting the needs of middle class adults, with extensive post-school education. In the same year I began work in the field the Russell Report on adult education was published. It called for a renewed focus on the needs of what were then called 'disadvantaged adults'. The report was shelved by Margaret Thatcher, then Education Secretary, but shaped the work of local authorities over a generation. The national campaign to secure 'A Right to Read' for adults, which was developed in the voluntary

sector, including at the centre where I worked, and supported by a BBC prime time series, became a core part of adult provision - in adult education centres and colleges alike. Literacy classes published their own writing, since working class experience was so seldom captured in print, and as one of my first adult literacy students put it, 'I'm not reading Andy Pandy, that's a racing certainty.' English for Speakers of Other Languages work followed. There was increased sensitivity to strategies to offer inclusive learning for people with disabilities.

One of Russell's recommendations - to create a residential college for adults in the north of England was acted on, and at the outset Northern College hired David Browning as an outreach worker, to go around Working Men's Clubs, tenants' groups, and miners' welfare associations, to discover how the College could best meet their needs. The work needed patience, and there was little initial response as mutual confidence was built. Three years in, it was clear that the investment was invaluable - and the College maintains the confidence of the working class communities it serves today. However, I can't help thinking that modern accountability systems would inhibit the investment needed in the building of that confidence.

Little of this rich mix survives now. You could, of course say, that with the U3A thriving - serving the needs of the already educationally confident; master-classes aplenty advertised daily in the Guardian, with single issue bodies like the Lincolnshire Bat Observation Society, with Saga's learning cruises, with the transformation of our lives the internet has shaped, including its explosion of on-line courses, and the success of MOOCs, this mix of independent adult classes more than makes up for the loss of public provision.

Certainly, we can take comfort from the observation that where adults have the confidence, and see the merits of coming together, literally or across the ether, to learn, they will invent the means to do so. That, surely lies behind the spread of book groups over the last fifteen years. It explains, too, the development of expert patient groups, like Parkinson's sufferers whose own research, and dialogue ensures that patients meet their doctors on more equal terms, able to negotiate treatment regimes.

That example illustrates a vital dimension of adult learning developed outside the confines of state provision – its ability to support the work of social movements seeking change. Highlander Folk High School in the USA played such a role in the civil rights movement, with weekend study schools involving Martin Luther King and Rosa Parkes in active reflection on strategy to secure rights (Horton, M.1990).

The second wave of feminist activism in the 1970s worked in the same way. Autonomous consciousness raising groups were complemented by the emergence of women's studies classes (I remember one entitled 'Should We Shoot Marx and Freud?' at a Ruskin History Workshop overflow meeting at my centre). In time these initiatives led to women's studies courses being adopted in universities.

But, as the Ministry of Reconstruction Board of Adult Education Final Report argued in 1919, it is a vital function of voluntary organisations to identify new agendas, and to identify learning programmes to address them:

In a modern community voluntary organisation must always occupy a prominent place. The free association of individuals is a normal process in civilised society, and one which arises from the inevitable inadequacy of State and municipal organisation. It is not primarily a result of defective organisation; it grows out of the existence of needs which the State and municipality cannot satisfy. Voluntary organisations, whatever their purpose, are fundamentally similar in their nature, in that they unite for a defined end people with a common interest (1919 report).

That kind of voluntary agenda setting has been a recurrent feature of the work I have been involved in as President of the International Council for Adult Education. It was there in the work of the Defenders of the Oppressed group in Haiti who responded to the earthquake, the collapse of civil administration, and the risk of rights to land being expropriated by developers by training barefoot legal workers to protect survivors' rights. It was present, too, in the work of Nirantar in India in developing programmes securing Dalit (untouchable) women's rights to literacy education in villages denying them access. It was central to the Ayto in the Philippines securing the right to

mother tongue education for their children; and, in the same country in collective learning to rebuild communities after the tsunami. It is what inspired the work of Paulo Freire, but also of the World Social Forum, where up to 60,000 people a year meet to assert that 'another world is possible', and work out how to make it. (Tuckett, 2015)

However, alongside voluntary action we need public support for life-wide learning – first to secure participation for under-represented groups; second to scale up effective innovations (as in the adult literacy campaign); and third to guarantee access to properly qualified teachers and resources. To that end we need a mix of provision and providers, of course, with secure though doubtless modest funding. We need to insist that it is axiomatic that adults have a right to learn, backed by secure funding to ensure access to under-represented groups. We also need outreach work, building alliances with community bodies, faith organisations and workplaces of all sorts. We need, too, strategies to engage and motivate adults to learn – especially for those adults who were failed by initial education and as a result don't see a role for learning in their lives.

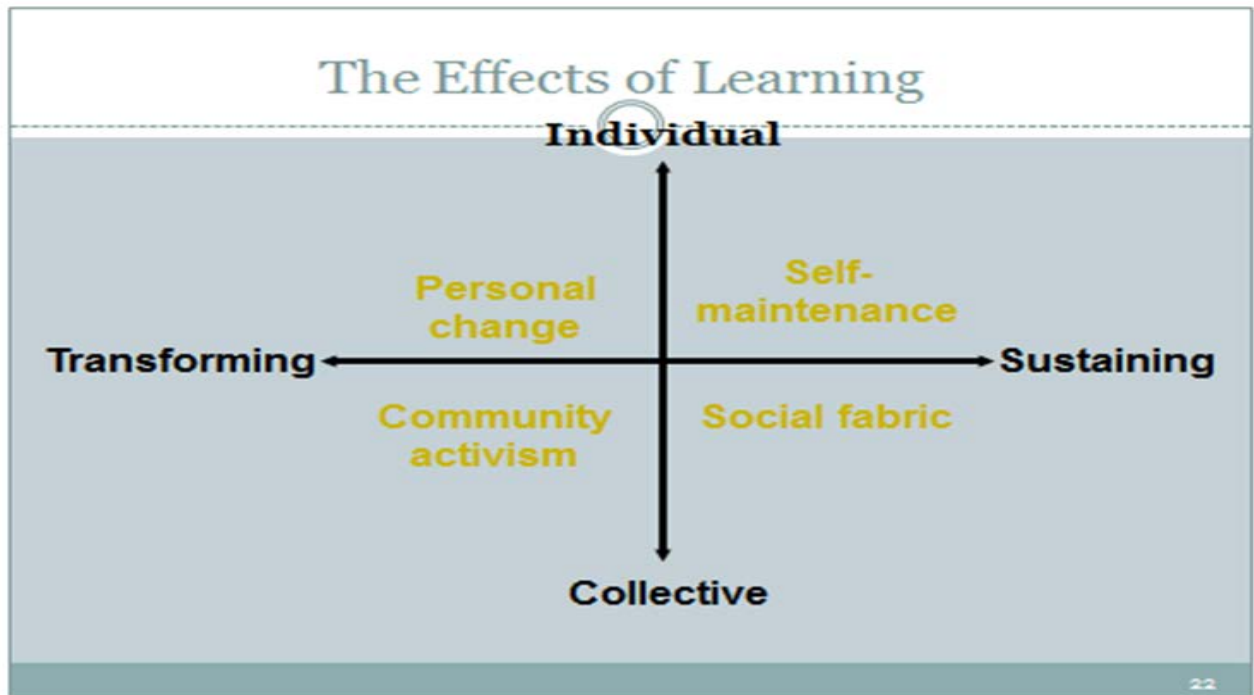
Motivation, for adult learners is a key part of the curriculum. Harbans Bhola, the distinguished Indian adult educator, understood this when he argued:

We must recognize that adult education in all societies of the world, whether developed or developing, is first a culture, and then a sector. Within the adult education culture, adults educate other adults, by beating drums for attention, singing folk songs, and shouting messages over loudspeakers, by putting posters on walls, and organising exhibits; by organising political and religious functions on street corners or in city parks; and by spreading the message over the radio and television. On the other hand, the adult education sector is made up of the adult education establishment comprising governmental and non-governmental institutions; ministries, enterprises, research bureaus, night schools, and adult learning centres. (Bhola, 1997, p47).

In the spirit of adult education as culture, NIACE started an annual Adult Learners' Week whilst I was there, and it has been adopted by UNESCO and spread since to 55 countries. It is based on the simple proposition that if you celebrate existing learners in all their diversity, it will encourage others to join in. By involving television stations, the press, thousands of local organisations; by establishing a free telephone learning advice helpline for adults to ring, and by putting a slip of paper encouraging them to do so in every girocheque, in the first year 55,000 people phoned the helpline; more than half were long term unemployed; within three months half had taken up a course.

It is possible to make learning accessible, and it is possible to build alliances across the breadth of our communities to create vibrant learning cultures, where everyone can feel at home. But the way to succeed in doing this does not lie in national targets, inspection regimes, and short-term funding alone. It requires from all of us, wherever we work, determination, clarity of vision, and the belief that we can make a difference, for innovation is not solely the job of voluntary associations. From government it requires money of course, but more importantly trust – in the professionalism of teachers and organisers, and in the ability of local decision makers to find local solutions that respond to local needs. The success of the Learning City movement across the world suggests that the alliances needed to create the cultural shifts central to making a learning culture are easier to forge at a sub-regional, or city level. Where local leadership, and the active participation of local associations, agencies, employers, colleges and universities, combine to overcome silos and see the benefits of pooling resource; where strategy and tactics to address the needs of communities and of individuals alike are shared to help people sustain and transform their circumstances, you have the beginnings of a life-wide learning culture in which everyone has the chance to thrive:

Chart 6



(Schuller et al, 2004)

What I have tried to explore in this talk is the vital need to complement a skills strategy with one focused on life-wide learning that gives people increased control over their lives, and enables them to shape change, through contesting the inequality ingrained in our current system, through the building of a culture of learning, a learning society where together we can make what the World Social Forum calls a world worth living in; a world where in the slogan of the UN Secretary General, no one is left behind. So – we need plumbing AND Pilates, Jesus and history, thunder and lightning.

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