



Community Based Adult Learning Thinking about the Future

Education is not an affair of childhood and youth; it is the business of the whole of life'
- Joseph Hole (1851)¹

When it comes time to write the history of adult learning, we hope that 2018 will be seen as a pivotal point. The past we can learn lessons from, the present we are reviewing in order that the future will shine brightly for all those people who come to need, want and benefit from community based adult learning.

Learning aimed at adults has a long historical tail. Under many guises learning opportunities for adults has origins in the Churches, Mechanics Institutes, Universities, Debating Societies, to name but a few. Then came the more formalised learning offered in schools, colleges and universities which prepare people for both the rudiments and specialist subjects we use in work. But what about the learning that helps people live life to the full, the kind that supports confidence building, positive health, healthy democracies, good citizenship and covers everyone's basic skills?



This is where community based adult learning comes in, a service (or maybe we should consider a better description) that's principle aim is to ensure equity in lifelong learning, a service that actively supports everyone, and particularly people who are on the margins of society to benefit from the range of educational opportunities that are available across the country.

In 1975 following the Alexander Report on Adult Education adult learning developed a clear community focus. Learning with the people in a geographic community or through a community of interest became the way to deliver adult education. Specialist Community Education staff were employed to facilitate these learning opportunities. These were the people who understood the real learning needs of their communities. They were not teachers they built the community based learning curriculums with communities and sourced the appropriately skilled teachers/tutors when necessary.



Increasingly economic and often, political agendas have forced these community needs-based learning into more generalised and more specific areas of learning - ESOL, literacy, employability skills. The importance of addressing these learning needs is not in question - they form the very basis of a strong and cohesive society, but we have to ask, how do we engage the most marginalised in subjects that 'appear' to have no relevance to them? Many people do not recognise their own knowledge limitations with literacy or numeracy, just accepting that they can only do what they do, not realising that they might have potential. So how do we change this if we want to have a highly skilled Scotland in the future? Where is the equal emphasis for learning opportunities on the many skills for life that follow on from success with the basics? If nothing else, having achieved at the basic levels, there is then a need to use these skills to pursue further learning. Learning to learn is a must have skill in itself to succeed in modern life and the broad thrust of adult learning nurtures a desire for and a recognition of the importance of lifelong and life wide learning.

¹ Essay on the History and Management of Literary, Scientific and Mechanics' Institutions.

Throughout our lives we ALL need to learn. No matter the stage of our life in adulthood, everyone has to learn techniques and skills that enable us to navigate changing technologies, economies, employability, shopping, looking after the family etc. Adult life is a continuum of changing situations and an adult learning curriculum that recognises the learning needs and wants of all, presents a key opportunity to build societal cohesiveness and capacity.

The Past

Historically, adult learning in Scotland can lay claims of aiming to be democratic and inclusive. The 1696 Education Act sought to place learning into every parish and while this was aimed at the education of children, it might be claimed that this parochial approach laid the foundations for community-based adult learning, where the Church wanted parishioners to be able to read its teachings. Importantly too, this was an inclusive system. Daniel Defoe is recorded as commenting that “the poorest people have their children taught and instructed.” The value of learning has never been in doubt and even at this early stage, with the right tutors and support anyone in Scotland could achieve a university education.



Scotland was at this period still a mainly rural country, but with the coming of industrialisation the need for new skills and knowledge became paramount. Through the rise of institutions such as the Mechanics Institutes, subject in science and technology were now, at least theoretically, available. Their subject matter however made them less than inclusive, but for those adults with a genuine thirst for learning, here was a new opportunity. That history often repeats itself can be seen by the fact that the Mechanics Institutes began to fail because of economic conditions. Conversely, the growth in industrialisation, also saw the development of apprenticeships. Young adults could now learn while earning.

With the 1872 Education Act, Scotland became a country that embraced and made available learning as a right. Children from this era now entered adulthood with at the very least an understanding of the process of learning. The Act also established learning as a government policy.

University learning in Scotland is legendary and while its early learners were from exclusive sectors, the advent of more and wider child education inevitably led to more people achieving university learning. However, we should remember that it was not until the late 19th century before universities allowed females to enter.

University learning was and is certainly part of the adult learning landscape but as the need for more technical skills became apparent, the growth of Further Education colleges began to play their part in widening access to learning. Many of these have now morphed into university status and maybe by doing so became less focused on non-formal learning.



From the mid 1970s, Community Education took up the mantle of non-formal learning. Following the pivotal Alexander Report (Adult Education: the challenge of change) which highlighted the need to recognise that many were disadvantaged through lack of access to learning it was key to the introduction of the community learning practitioner.

The Present

Adult learning now under the auspices of community education and to a degree devolved to local authorities created a situation where community education practitioners became the norm and became known as an ‘empowering profession’ Programmes of learning opportunities, for all, were developed and run across communities. People could now learn according to both need and want. The ‘need’ came from real-life issues that people face on an ongoing basis. The ‘want’ came from a desire to expand skills and knowledge for personal development or simply personal enjoyment.

While this was largely the remit of local authorities, central government’s economic and social policies gradually introduced more specific and targeted demands. The government report ‘Communities: Change through Learning’ and the subsequent circular 04/99 can now be seen as other pivotal points. Importantly for both the profession and the adult

learning curriculum, the report suggested a “shift to a definition of community education as primarily an approach rather than a sector... “ The term Community Learning and Development then began to replace that of simply community education. In 2002 the then Scottish Executive published ‘Community Learning and Development: the way forward’ which identified the need to focus on community development as well as community learning. The focus therefore subtly shifted from people to place.

Community learning and development coalesced three broad strands: youth work, which sought to develop our young people, adult learning and community development. It was around this time that adult learning began to be squeezed and compartmentalized.

A particular focus and financial support was developed in terms of community-based adult literacy and numeracy programmes, which in turn began to shape a more specific set of teacher/tutor roles and they tended to develop separately from other elements of community learning.



Government became increasingly engaged in adult learning, but as a constituent part of their wider economic and social policies. ‘Skills for Scotland - A Lifelong Skills Strategy’ focused on the development of economic and employability skills. There was a continuing commitment to lifelong learning but the danger was it was being subsumed into the larger picture. Concerns were raised that the removal of ring-fenced budgets would make adult learning a soft target for budget cuts and adult learning indicative budgets were being eroded.

Throughout the next decade what was considered community based adult learning began to change to address Government priorities, not focus on community need. An expert’s group was set up to look at what was needed in adult learning, discussions took place and negotiations with Scottish Government led to a Statement of Ambition for Adult Learning being launched in 2014, highlighting government priorities for adult learning in Scotland. This is the current policy driver for adult learning.

The Future

So how do we want this to play out in the future? Measuring the impact or wider value of adult learning is complex. Economic and indeed social pressures demand that limited resources are used not just effectively but for the greater good. Adult learning, however, while it can be a collective activity for the collective good, appears to be considered as something that remains a personal commitment. People have always engaged with learning for different reasons and the outcomes can be multi-faceted. While a number of people may be learning the same set of skills, their reasons for doing so and their individual contributions to the wider community, never mind the economy and society, may vary considerably. Adult learning should and does have two basic purposes – self-development and building community capacity. Ultimately these can feed into the larger economy and wider society.



If Adult learning satisfies personal needs and wants should society recognize this as a key to helping develop the individual?

While adult learning is to a great extent, then satisfying personal needs and wants learning on one’s own can be a solitary mission. There are many e-learning opportunities where it is possible to be taught a subject by oneself, but learning is a communal activity. Learning along with other like-minded people provides a social bond and depending on the learning being engaged with there is the opportunity to build collective capacity. This is certainly the case in terms of family learning where even if the learning is focused on the child, adults not only contribute but also learn to understand their children’s learning needs and potential support.

Where the learning is part of a community of practice there is the opportunity to learn from and contribute to the end purpose. The same applies where the learning is specifically community based geographically. Each helps build community capacity, alongside personal capacity. In time this increased capacity, both personal and community,

can feed into wider capacity building. Social isolation is a recognized challenge in today's society. Learning opportunities that bring people together can only be beneficial in this respect.

If learning builds capacity at the family/community level, while it contributes to wider economic and social capacity, should it be rooted in family or community?

Learning is a generation game. Education of the young is now a given. It is true that continuing learning for the few is also well established, but to coin that modern phrase what about the many? Learning for and at work is sometimes sporadic, and what of learning for the more mature?

Should we leave it to chance that learning happens through volunteering and via groups and associations? If we do this, then, what about opportunities for inter-generational learning? Learning from and with people of different cultures opens up access to experience and skills we might never know about, while at the same time opens up new vistas for all, if we're only learning online how do we really get to know other cultures?



Community based learning opportunities need to be developed as a means of building greater citizenship!

Our learning institutions provide important adult learning opportunities and are rightly focused on developing specific skills and knowledge. Where then does the the curriculum for adults that focuses on the knowledge, skills and understanding to play a full and active part in society sit? More importantly what of democracy, government and law, or the skills and knowledge to explore political and social issues critically, weigh evidence, debate and make reasoned arguments, and ultimately take place in society as responsible citizens'?

What would a more 'open door' approach from educational institutions that enables adult learners to access resources and knowledge, without necessarily having to engage in formal learning look like?

Learning is lifelong in Scotland it's also life-wide. Yet, learning is perceived all too often as something that is done to you. Many of the things we need to learn as adults are part of our daily lives and often simply involve 'know how'. While we are all different there are a number of common areas we must all in some way learn to navigate and achieve. Some of these are practical – how to cook a healthy balanced meal, how to change a wheel on the car, how to fill in my tax form etc. Other needs are more cerebral or emotional–how can I overcome my fears about.... How can I meet new people, I cannot live my life on my own.. There is also social learning – learning how to work in a team, learning how to manage a community organisation.

Is there a place in adult learning for developing a broad 'lifelong learning continuum' that charts the key stages in our lives and the learning that can help us achieve?

For some adults there is a need to firstly learn how to learn. Previous experiences have maybe been off-putting, basic learning has been disrupted, deep-seated prejudices have taken over, etc. Empathetic adult educators and tutors can be a key factor in terms of building motivation but there are skills of learning to be learned. Do we need to explain better what adult learning is? Do we want to develop a core curriculum for adults that is just that-for adults?

How can adults be encouraged to experience learning in a non-threatening and maybe even a 'fun' way?

Adult learning should be an activity that engages, is inclusive, builds capacity and can ultimately contribute to social and economic sustainability.

Can we free adult learning from the shackles of didactic policy makers and put it into the hands of the people who need and want learning, supported by an 'empowering profession'? What if?

