

Adult education for a change: Advocacy, learning festivals, migration, and the pursuit of equity and social justice.

Adult learners' weeks and learning festivals

Adult Learners' Weeks and learning festivals celebrate existing learners, stimulate others to participate, and seek to influence policy makers and practitioners to improve opportunities for adult learners, especially those from groups under-represented in current provision. They engage a wide range of partners in education, business, the media, and in civil society. They make visible the wide variety of contexts in which adults learn, provide a platform for experimentation, and for adult learners' voices to be more effectively heard.

Adult Learners' Week are, to use a distinction made by Harbans Bhola, an example of adult education as culture. He writes:

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 organizing exhibits; by organizing 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 1997a, 47).

Used as a platform to celebrate the experience of marginalised groups, as a vehicle for attracting attention to research evidence about barriers to equitable participation, and how they may be overcome, and for popular manifestations, festivals constitute both a framework for advocacy and a site of innovative learning.

This paper explores the characteristics and development of Adult Learners' Week in the UK, its relationship with wider social policy affecting adults and its focus on

under-represented groups, illustrating this through its focus on migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. It then examines how the idea spread, its adoption by UNESCO following the fifth World Conference of Adult Education, CONFINTEA, and the role played too, by the European Union in fostering the development of the Week in EU states. It looks at the similarity in the challenges faced by ALWs and the World Social Forum in refreshing the form and content of annual festivals. The paper concludes with a review of the relative successes and failures of the Week as a tool both for motivation and for advocacy.

Adult Learners' Weeks - characteristics of the UK festival

Adult Learners' Week (ALW) has been celebrated in the four nations of the United Kingdom each year since 1992, although in England alone the name was changed to Festival for Learning in 2015. It is a festival based on the simple premise that celebrating existing adult learners in all their diversity can stimulate other adults to participate, and that it can contribute to public policy. It combines national set-piece events, television and media activity with locally organised celebrations, taster days, and innovative activities, along with targeted research and advocacy. At its heart has been the award of individual and group awards for Outstanding Adult Learners, selected as emblematic of the way learning in adult life can transform lives, and inspire others. In the UK the ability to use the awards to encourage participation by under-represented groups has been enhanced by the partnership which the national co-ordinating organisation, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE, now the Learning and Work Institute), developed with terrestrial broadcasters, and with a national free telephone advisory service. The helpline was set up specifically for ALW, staffed by adult guidance workers, and supported with targeted publicity material. Links with policy makers were secured through ministers hosting national awards ceremonies, Parliamentary receptions, and the publication of research and briefings related to targeted policy challenges annually.

ALW engages partners across higher, further, and community education, civil society organisations, the broadcasters, the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress, the Arts Council, the European Social Fund, and UK ministerial departments and local government.

Alongside individual and group awards for Outstanding Adult Learners awards have been targeted learners from under-represented groups, among them ex-prisoners, unemployed adults, ethnic and linguistic minorities, older adults, women returning to work, mental health service users and migrants. These have been backed by thematic campaigns like Learning at Work Day. The Day has included a bring your daughter to work initiative, aiming to overcome gender stereotyping in career choice, job swaps within and between organisations, as well as conventional professional development days. A second campaign, 'Growing Old Disgracefully', was inspired by Liverpool pensioners singing opera on an open top bus, and giving themselves permission to behave differently now they were older. A third focused on the learning needs of migrants. (Tuckett 1997, 54; Martinez & Weil 2000,3; NIACE 1999,8; Yarnit 2011,117-8).

The Week shines a media spotlight on the relatively private process of group and individual learning, and provides a platform for learners to help shape the debate about their needs and aspirations. In the UK it has created a visual iconography for adult learning, fostered partnerships between providers, and created a wider understanding of the breadth of contexts in which adults learn. It has, too, at key points over the twenty five years critically affected politicians' perspectives on the transformative potential of adult learning. It has provided a platform for the launch of research findings that highlight the gap in participation between the learning rich and the learning poor, and the award winners' stories have stimulated adults from under-represented groups to participate, and at the same time puts policy makers in touch with the human stories resulting from their policies.

Adult Learners' Week in the UK - advocacy and policy impact

The UK Adult Learners' Week was in part a response to the invisibility of adult education in public policy making, and to government plans to cut funding for adult education for personal development and fulfilment, unless the provision was certificated, and led to a qualification related to national priorities for training (DES 1991). A strident and effective campaign, co-ordinated by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), the Local Government Association, who collected half a million signatures on a petition, and, critically, the 9,000

branches of the National Federation of Women's Institutes (whose members wrote tens of thousands of letters to MPs) saw the policy modified within six weeks in the autumn of 1991. In debating the initial proposals, politicians argued that people did not want to fund flower arranging on the taxes. NIACE found a Brixton florist, formerly a merchant banker, who had undergone re-training through a community based evening class, and then hired half his fellow students for his very successful business. The Independent newspaper published his story, and within a fortnight politicians were arguing that 'of course' they recognised that flower arranging could lead to floristry. ALW was timed to coincide with the last week in which the legislation was to be debated in Parliament - and the campaign had sufficient head of steam for the government to bring forward the final date of legislation. Nevertheless, the law passed, and cut budgets for adult learning, whilst protecting privileged funding of certificated provision with national funding, and leaving cash strapped local government to fund learning for personal and community development (Tuckett 1996).

A number of strands contributed to thinking that produced the Week. As Bhola observes campaigning as a strategy for mobilising people to learn has a centuries long history, and the example of UNESCO's International Literacy Day (ILD), which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2016, showed that a campaign focused on a particular skill, or target group, can garner significant attention, and can shift policy priorities, at least in the short run (Bhola 1997b, UNESCO 2016). If ILD was one source of ideas, so was the experience of the small Outstanding Adult Learners Awards initiative organised by the American Association for Adult and Community Education in the late 1980s. It culminated in a congressional breakfast for a small number of adult students from under-represented groups (including a speaker of English as a Second Language and a prisoner). Martin Yarnit had written a powerful piece in the journal *Adults Learning*, making the case for a year of adult learning (Yarnit 1989). NIACE commissioned him to visit the American example to report on the feasibility of mounting an inclusive campaign in the UK, as a defence of forms of adult learning increasingly facing budget cuts as an early manifestation of neo-liberal policies took hold in government. The NIACE Director had also had earlier experience of the power of learning festivals, in attracting media attention in helping to reverse planned cuts through the use of a week- long 24 hour teach-

in. (Hemstedt & Tuckett 1981). When Yarnit reported back NIACE's Executive agreed, with some reluctance and considerable nervousness, to support an Adult Learners' Week in the UK (Yarnit 1990).

At the same time, the BBC (Britain's public broadcaster) was agreeing for the first time to accept government funding from the Manpower Services Commission (an arm's length government training agency) to mount a series of 16 short sketches on prime time television to promote participation in learning - whether certificated or not. Given fifty years of fruitful co-operation, the BBC and NIACE agreed to work together to time their initiatives in the same week to increase the impact of both. They secured funding for a helpline to offer advice to adults watching the programmes, which were broadcast at prime time, next to the most popular programmes. Community outreach officers working for regional Independent Television Companies, feeling pressure to demonstrate the value of their posts, secured coverage on regional news programmes of the winners of regional awards, and Channel 4, the only other national television company in 1992, commissioned a fictional play focused on a self-taught adult learner. Such a plethora of television coverage ensured widespread national and local radio and newspaper coverage, too. IBM provided the venue at the heart of London for a national policy conference. Politicians with an interest in adult learning, stimulated by the 1991 campaign, formed an All Party Parliamentary Group on Adult Learning and hosted a reception in Parliament during the Week. It was a powerful mix, and had the effect of making adults' right to learn, and the under-representation of working class adults, unemployed people, older adults, people with disabilities, migrants lacking the English language, and ex-offenders all subjects of significant national debate (Tuckett 2012).

As a national non-government organisation bringing together providers from a range of educational sectors, alongside universities, businesses, trade unions and the media, NIACE had long promoted partnership to further adult learners' interests. The creation of ALW provided a framework for practitioners and policy makers to work together at a time when broader public policy promoted competition between providers, and a focus on the already educationally successful. NIACE also acted as a publisher and commissioner of policy focused

research, producing as the migration example below illustrates, annual evidence of the continuing marginalisation of significant groups of adults, alongside good practice documents and policy proposals to strengthen provision, and to support, each year, a co-ordinated advocacy campaign highlighting the needs of specific under-represented groups, within the broad inclusive and celebratory festival. That combination - of celebration and policy advocacy was based on the tacit recognition that celebrations often work better in persuading people than direct confrontation.

Of course, not everyone was immediately won over to the ALW model of national and local celebration. Providers in Liverpool felt it to be invidious to single out 'outstanding adult learners, however emblematic they might be, and in the first year argued against individual awards. Group awards were added in 1993, in response, but having seen the positive media impact made by the life and learning stories of winners, Merseyside providers nominated individual from the second year. A longer lasting critique surrounded the timing of the Week. It was argued that providers were closing for the summer in May, and that the Week would be more effective as a recruiting tool in September. The co-ordinating committee pointed out that the timing was chosen when maximum television coverage could be secured, and that local partners were too busy preparing for the new academic year to organise a festival in September. This analysis was borne out when a September sister event, Sign Up Now, was launched for September in the late 1990s, but secured little local activity.

From ALW's second year, the European Social Fund matched funding, and the Week evolved into a regular annual platform at which the powerful stories of outstanding adult learners helped decision makers to recognise the importance of a broad range of adult learning opportunities -for civic engagement, economic prosperity, and for the quality of life, and at least until 2003 ameliorating the dominant qualifications and labour market focused utilitarianism of national post-school skills and learning policy.

Successive ministers used the Week to announce new policy initiatives affecting adults - a process that was at its most helpful in addressing the needs of interests and needs of under-represented adults during the first New Labour government

from 1997. David Blunkett gave his first public speech as Secretary of State for Education and Employment at the ALW awards ceremony, and announced the creation of a national task force to advise on adult learning policy. The range of initiatives launched over the next five years widened opportunities for under-represented groups, instigated a £9 billion literacy, numeracy and English as a Second Language programme, and expanded investment in wider adult learning opportunities markedly. The Week became an event at which the impact of initiatives was roundly debated in the media, and in debates between practitioners and policy makers. (Holford & Welikala 2013, Taylor 2007).

However, once Blunkett moved ministerial office, increased Treasury (finance ministry) influence on what was now called skills policy, led to a radical reduction of adult learning opportunities. ALW became much more a defensive tool - highlighting the wider social benefits of learning and the continuing importance of educational opportunities for transforming adults' lives. At the same time, mainstream television coverage of the Week diminished, in part with the disappearance of distinct ITV regions, in part because of the remorseless search for the new that characterises television programming. Organisers have been less immediately effective in reaching mass audiences through social media, once again because of the fragmentation of markets that are distinctive features of the new media.

Over a decade from 2004 two million adult places in publicly funded education were lost in England, yet year on year during ALW Ministers and key policy makers would make passionate speeches on the importance of adult learning to dignity, democratic inclusion, and as a route to second and subsequent chances in life. It could be argued that without the visibility of an annual national festival, things might have been worse, but whilst ALW has created a wider understanding of the diversity of ways adults learn, it has not led to strong, stable and sustainable structures or funding for adult learning.

Migration

In relation to migration and learning, the UK experienced considerable public concern, fuelled by some press caricature of the motivation and engagement of

migrants to the UK in the mid 2000s, exacerbated by the 2007 London underground bombing. As a result various measures were taken by the UK government to limit public support for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, and to deny asylum seekers access to ESOL for the first six months of their stay.

ALW has helped present a different view of migration to Britain through a three track process. First, the stories of learners highlight the critical importance of learning opportunities for effective integration and fulfilment for refugees and other migrants alike, and in addition demonstrate the learners' commitment to community building. Second, the annual participation surveys published by NIACE for ALW draw attention to groups that do participate and those who are under-represented. For adults from ethnic and linguistic minorities regular NIACE surveys highlighted the under-representation of people, but particularly women, from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Somali heritage backgrounds. (Aldridge & Tuckett, 2003, Aldridge, Dutton & Tuckett 2006, Aldridge, Hayley & Tuckett, 2008). These studies are backed by qualitative studies (Ward & Spacey 2008) and by a policy inquiry (Grover 2007) leading to the third part of the exercise, which involved using the engagement with politicians afforded by ALW to further advocacy for improved opportunities for migrant education.

The stories of award winners, and the attendant publicity they generate, continue to be critical to the advocacy dimension of ALW. The Daily Mirror highlighted the experience of Adnan Saeed in 2007. After work as a lab assistant in Pakistan, Adnan moved to the UK to marry, but language difficulties prevented him from continuing to work in the health sector. Adnan found a mosque based self-esteem and confidence building course, undertook ESOL classes, and became a Birmingham Children's Hospital support care worker, determined not only to progress in his own career, but said, as the Mirror reported him saying, 'I can also help others... I want others to benefit the way I have. (Daily Mirror 2007).

In the same year a group of adults from the Burmese and Karen refugee community attended sessions to learn journalistic and community reporting skills, in order to share their experience of Burma with the wider world. They like so many others described how learning overcame their feeling of silence and exclusion. Another group winner, 'DIY Your Future', a group of Asian women in Sheffield, settled in

Britain for a large number of years, contested traditionalist views in the Asian community on women's roles by coming together to learn plumbing, decorating, and electrics - all areas seen traditionally as men's domain. They felt empowered and more independent as a result. As one said, 'In our culture, it is easy to think that these are men's jobs - they do the plumbing - and we should just stick to the cooking, But this is a life skill - it really is.' One course stimulated the appetite for others, and several members began wider learning journeys (NIACE 2007).

Each year provides new voices. Vitalis Ndeda also illustrated the will to help others. He came to the UK after the collapse of the former USSR, and got a job as an Assistant Engineer on London Underground. In 2004 his trade union learning representative encouraged him to take a course to be a learning rep. Following that he took a Discussion Leaders course, and was instrumental in negotiating with his employer to provide further professional training for staff. He became an assessor, and then a qualified further education teacher. He is now a health and safety specialist for London Underground, training and assessing employees with Lewisham College (NIACE 2011).

Jane Ward and Rachel Spacey's research reacted to the findings of the NIACE 2006 participation survey by interviewing Bangladeshi, Somali and Pakistani women, highlighting the key difficulties found in living without the language of the host community. Not only were these the groups of women least participating in education as adults, but they were also the poorest groups of women in Britain. Ward and Spacey's report, *Dare to Dream* was used, alongside strategic field visits in persuading John Denham as Secretary of State for Industry Universities and Science to give funding priority to meeting the groups' needs, albeit in the context of significant underfunding of ESOL more widely. If *Dare to Dream* showed how advocacy might have an effect the broader analysis of NIACE's Inquiry into ESOL was altogether less successful. (Aldridge, Dutton & Tuckett 2006, Ward & Spacey 2008, Grover 2007).

International Adult Learners' Weeks

Through the 1990s, comparable ALWs and lifelong learning festivals developed in countries as diverse as Switzerland and Jamaica, Slovenia and South Africa. In

some cases, like Jamaica, this built on earlier initiatives, in others, like Australia, Switzerland and Slovenia it was the result of engagement with NIACE's Week that led local providers to design partnerships to develop bespoke festivals, all distinctive in their organisational focus, but all combining advocacy and mobilisation as key dimensions of the work.

International Learning festivals/ALWs have encompassed great imagination, 'creating a public space for collective experimentation and reflection' (Bochynek 2004a, 2). The centrepiece of Russia's first Adult Learners' Week was making the Trans-Siberian Railway a learning journey, with events organised at each railway stop on the way. The next year this was paralleled with a trip down the Volga River. In Benin, in the weeks before International Literacy Day, the organisers took a lorry and literacy materials and visited each village in the country to mount an event to mobilise participation in adult literacy. In the UK we found the oldest learners and the most adventurous centenarian learners in the country and the Minister of Education hosted them in London. The oldest, Fred Moore 108, from New Milton in Hampshire studied French and art at his retirement home. In South Africa, the first Week, organised in 2005, culminated in an awards ceremony on Robben Island, months after its decommissioning as an apartheid jail, reclaiming the space for citizens' voices. In later years the festival was linked to the development of the Cape as a learning region (Walters & Etkind 2004).

The importance of learner voice is a common feature of Weeks and festivals. As Belanger commented, 'The pioneers of Adult Learners' Weeks understood that the only way to make a real difference was to give adults the chance to express their views and have them listened to directly' (Canadian Commission for UNESCO 2002), and Bochynek develops this in identifying the role of festivals as tools to democratize lifelong learning through 'fostering active civil societies and democratic cultures', recognising that widening participation is a precondition for active and equitable civil societies (Bochynek 2003, 176; Bochynek 2004, 2). In the UK the drive to include learners' voices led both to the creation of national adult learners' forums, and to the development by adults with learning difficulties of their own learning charter (Jacobsen 2000).

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In Europe the conditions for spreading the initiative benefited from a policy context shaped by the 1993 publication, by the European Commission, led by Jacques Delors, of the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment. It highlighted the importance of lifelong learning both to Europe's future prosperity and to its social cohesion (Commission of the European Communities 1993). Following it, successive European Presidencies held high level conferences on future lifelong learning policy, building on an initial event in Athens in 1994 (Trantallidi 1996). They brought together key policy makers and advocates across the European Union, with particularly active participation by the European Association for the Education of Adults, of which NIACE was the UK member. This process was accelerated by the designation of 1996 as European Year of Lifelong Learning, by the publication of key policy papers on lifelong learning by both UNESCO and OECD, and in 2000 by the adoption of a European memorandum on adult learning.

In this context there was widespread interest in the role of motivational campaigns, and each year NIACE hosted a range of international partners, from Europe and the wider world, to explore the possibilities of mounting comparable events in other countries. In 1995, Australia and Jamaica held their first weeks, as did the then Czechoslovakia. In 1996 South Africa, Belgium (Flanders) and Slovenia followed suit. The Slovenian Adult Education Institute actively promoted the idea across the Balkans, arguing its relevance in rebuilding civil society following the wars in the former Yugoslavia. As Suada Selimovic argued:

Looking back, we see the Learning Festival as a beam of light that connects an increasing number of citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the idea of lifelong learning... At a time when the country is still divided into two (the Federation and the Republic of Spaska), the Learning Festival succeeded in uniting all of Bosnia and Herzegovina (in Bochynek, 2004, 8).

With the support of the German international development agency for adult learning, all the countries of South East Europe developed learning festivals (DVV/IIZ 2002).

However, the spread to more than countries resulted from the adoption of the Week by UNESCO following the fifth world conference on adult education (CONFINTEA V) in Hamburg, which recommended in its Declaration and Agenda for Action that UNESCO should adopt an annual International Adult Learners' Week, timed to coincide with International Literacy Day. The timing was critical. Following CONFINTEA V several countries, including India expressed anxiety that a generic Week would weaken the focus on literacy, and that it was better suited to more developed economies. The agreement to time the Week in September to build on International Literacy Day was of key significance in its adoption at the General Conference of UNESCO.

ALW has had little impact in Latin America, in part because few structured opportunities for adults are available, despite the initial International Adult Learners' Week being held in Brazil. In Switzerland the strength of the Week lies in its ownership by cantons. In Australia, as in Slovenia and Quebec, the organising energy that underpins the success of the Week derives from the national NGO for adult education, funded by state and federal governments. However, elsewhere in the Balkans whilst the original organising commitment came from the Slovenian Institute of Adult Education, it has been the German agency DVV which has supported local organisations with funding, in the belief that adult learning fosters the development of critical and engaged democracy.

Nevertheless, UNESCO's endorsement led to an important shift in the legitimisation and dissemination of learning festivals. Within six years of CONFINTEA V, there were festivals in Botswana, Egypt, Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Swaziland, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Brazil and Mexico, as well as 24 countries in the European region (which in UNESCO includes Canada, where Quebec was an early convert) (Schemann 2011). . Not everyone found the case for annual festivals convincing. Among the European countries, and in contrast to its neighbours Norway and Finland, Sweden was sceptical- its key NGO arguing that the Week would add little since adult learning was already so widely embedded in Swedish social life. Unlike its neighbours Sweden limited its involvement to a single festival, believing that resources could be used more effectively elsewhere.

UNESCO's endorsement was, however, a key help in advocacy in the global South, as Farrell Hunter, national Adult Learners' Week co-ordinator in South Africa explained in 2004:

In South Africa, as a direct result of apartheid, an estimated 12 million adults do not have a general education and about 3-4 million have no schooling at all. Since democracy in 1994, adult basic education has been brought into the formal education system, and many improvements have come about in the area of planning and policy development. However, much more needs to be done to provide actual learning opportunities through the implementation of quality learning programs that reach adults in their communities. For obvious reasons, most countries place the bulk of their attention on formal schooling for children and adult basic education remains marginalised. The current Department of Education spending on adult basic education is less than one percent.

Therefore, the international profile given to ALW as a UNESCO-endorsed campaign helps to draw attention to the importance of adult education. The campaign provides for advocacy and lobbying for adult education and to help to bring adult education into the mainstream (in Bochynek 2004, 10).

By the CONFINTEA mid-term review in Bangkok in 2003, UNESCO had convened an active network of ALW and learning festival co-ordinators, which met and shared strategies for engaging under-representing groups, and in raising their concerns with policy makers. *Convergence*, the international journal of adult education had produced a special issue on Adult Learners' Weeks (*Convergence 2002*). Yet the mid-term review meeting was striking for the absence of senior representatives of member states. If CONFINTEA V was a high water mark in international policy making for adult learning, the tide seemed to be withdrawing in the first decade of the new century.

Nevertheless, the creativity of national organisations persisted. In Slovenia, where awards had been made every year from 1996, the Role Models Attract initiative interviewed earlier award winners to generate you tube films to stimulate

participation by people with similar experiences (Slovenian Institute of Adult Education 2017).

The role of Adult Learners' Weeks in mobilising under-represented groups was an important strand in the regional events leading to CONFINTEA VI in Belem in 2009, as well as in the civil society pre-conference, and in the Conference itself. A particular feature of the work was the support that festivals offered to learners' voices, and to the international coalition of adult learners' organisations that was so impressive at Belem. The Belem Framework for Action and Statement of Evidence confirmed the continuing importance of ALWs and learning festivals:

(We commit ourselves to) 'promoting and supporting more equitable access to, and participation in, adult learning and education through well-designed and targeted guidance and information, as well as activities and programmes such as Adult Learners' Weeks and learning festivals' (UIL 2010, 40).

Despite this commitment, in practice Belem marked the end of UNESCO co-ordination of the ALW network. Like broadcasters, institutes with limited resources need fresh foci to keep funders' attentions. As a result, from 2009 the initiative moved back from international co-ordination to national and regional co-operation. In Europe a series of EU Grundtvig and Erasmus funded projects have facilitated the co-operative development of festivals, but there have been no new participating countries in the global South (European Union 2012). Nevertheless, the Week thrives in many of the countries that have developed festivals, from Ireland and Slovenia to Korea and Australia, linking formal and informal providers, educators and businesses in creative partnerships.

World Social Forum: a multi-purpose wider adult learning festival?

When the World Social Forum (WSF) first met in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 to assert that 'another world is possible' as an antidote to the neo-liberal consensus at the World Economic Forum in Davos, some 60,000 representatives of civil society engaged in what was clearly a convivial learning festival, with many of the features of Adult Learners' Weeks, but on a massive scale. The energies released by the initiative were impressive, and subsequent global, regional and national

Social Forums are testament to the power of its core proposal that we can, together, imagine a better way of running the world (Eldred & Tuckett, 2004). However, I include reference to the Forum in this paper because it shares a similar challenge to that faced by ALWs, in maintaining an effective and familiar form whilst finding ever more imaginative ways to mobilise participation, and to celebrate diversity. Yet despite all the creative thinking, and the work on alternatives to a market led globalisation that characterise the work at each Forum, and despite the slow acceptance of ideas like the financial transactions tax proposal developed at WSF, there is no consistent and effective mechanism for the energy to be transformed into the kind of social action that secures change.

Has Adult Learners' Week succeeded or failed?

At one level, it is hard to argue with the view that few educational ideas cross national boundaries as effectively as the Adult Learners' Week initiative has done. Its strength has been in part the result of the inclusive, permissive and context specific nature of the initiative. In a review of the UK's Adult Learners' Week in 2012 Stanistreet concluded:

Over the last 20 years there has been a clear shift in the public profile of adult learning, supported by groundbreaking research on its wider benefits, which has helped create a climate in which the value of adult learning is valued by politicians of all parties (Stanistreet 2012, 10).

There have been practical gains - for example in Norway and Switzerland the festivals helped to create the momentum that led to lifelong learning legislation, and in England a permanent national on-line and telephone advice service *learnirect*, is a direct offshoot of the Week. Yet, despite the encouraging speeches of politicians, there has been no net movement over twenty five years in participation by the poorest quintile in the population in the UK, and the least skilled are under-represented across Europe whatever the overall volume of participation. Whilst access and provision have improved for women returners and for people with disabilities, the overall picture is bleak, at least in the UK. In addition to the loss of adult learning places in public provision in England than in 2003, employers train fewer people than before the economic crash of 2007-8, and

when they train they offer more opportunities to those who already have qualifications. Yarnit summarises it well:

Learning has become more popular among the higher social classes, minority ethnic groups and the young. However, older people, men, unemployed people and those in social classes C2 and D/E continue to be resistant to its appeal. A third of adults do not take part in any learning activity. This is disappointing, and to a degree represents a failure on the part of Adult Learners' Week as an organising and campaigning tool. Of course the Week alone, even with all its allies around the country, was never going to eradicate a deep seated social problem. From a personal point of view I had hoped for more. (Yarnit 2011, 121-122).

So, too, had I, and during the years around the millennium it looked as though we would achieve more. The political and cultural forces that have dominated this quarter century do of course need resisting, with flair imagination and a sense of fun. But the value of the Week does not only reside in its public advocacy. The mix of celebration of existing learners, especially from marginalised groups, motivation, and advocacy, combined with taking learning to public spaces, is a dynamic with proven impact, not least on the lives of the winners. ALWs have fostered pride and recognition of the importance of adult learning in local communities, and provided the stimulus for local voluntary and statutory agencies to create a patchwork of offers to keep learning opportunities alive. Whilst they offer no guarantee of sustainable funded adult learning when wider austerity policies dominate, they provide an annual occasion when press and politicians do address the learning needs of adults, and when the power of learning to transform adult lives can inspire anew.

In relation to policy, then, Adult Learners' Week is a vehicle for adults to become visible and vocal in the policy process - a useful tool, and a necessary if modest component, perhaps, in the overall pursuit of equity and social justice. Beyond that, as Bhola makes clear, it claims a space for adults to celebrate the delights the challenges and joys of learning.

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