

Reconstructions of Adult Education

November 2019 will mark an important educational centenary: the publication of the Ministry of Reconstruction's Final Report on *Adult Education*. The report, largely authored by R.H. Tawney, set the groundwork for liberal adult education in Britain for the rest of the 20th century. Its centenary is, we believe, a vital opportunity to reflect on the needs and possibilities for adult education today.

What we propose is a programme of activities around the theme "*Reconstructions of Adult Education*". This would include historical research and a wide-ranging debate designed to open up new avenues for future development. Much of the historical research would be undertaken jointly with adult students and adult education organisations.

Following exploratory discussions between ourselves, we now invite you to add your weight to this programme of activities. We are at an early stage, but it is already clear that we shall need contributions of many kinds – some are suggested below.

Background: The 1919 Report

The Ministry of Reconstruction was set up under Lloyd George's wartime coalition government in 1917 to oversee rebuilding "the national life on a better and more durable foundation". Its adult education committee was asked:

"To consider the provision for, and possibilities of, Adult Education (other than technical or vocational) in Great Britain, and to make recommendations."

Chaired by A.L. Smith, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, the committee's members were leading figures from public life; several, such as Tawney, Albert Mansbridge and Basil Yeaxlee, were prominent in adult education. One of its two secretaries was a former member of the first Oxford/WEA tutorial class (in Longton, Stoke-on-Trent).

The report is rightly known for its ringing assertions of principle: "adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong"; it "should be spread uniformly and systematically over the whole community". But it also contained what, as Lawrence Goldman put it, served as a "template" for the development of adult education over the following decades.

Today's Challenge

The challenges we face today differ, of course, from those of 1919 – but they are also massive. For example:

- For millennia, work has been a vital part of the human condition. But, as Alan Tuckett wrote recently in *The Guardian*, "robotics and artificial intelligence promise to do for white collar jobs, as globalisation did for their blue collar counterparts". Billionaires like Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk suggest a "universal basic income" instead. That may prevent us starving – *but what will we do?*
- Our population is ageing. We know that people stay healthier, and make a bigger contribution to society and civic debate, when they are active and engaged learners. *How can we engage the wisdom of elders?*

- Our democracy is increasingly strident and polarised. While social media facilitate new forms of connection, exchanges are often ill-considered, and even ill-tempered. *How can we develop a more thoughtful and civilised civic culture?*

Adult education, according to the 1919 report, is an essential part of citizenship. Yet over the last three decades, opportunities for adult education have been swept away. Though we celebrate organisations – the WEA and Oxford University among them – which have resisted this tide, most adult education now focuses on relatively narrow training for younger adults in workplace skills.

Our Proposal

We propose a programme of activities, centred on the centenary of the 1919 Report, which both recover and re-evaluate the twentieth-century history of adult education, and set out a vision for a life-wide adult education for the century ahead. It will comprise four overlapping and interacting themes:

- A forward-looking panel, composed rather like the Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, “To consider the provision for, and possibilities of, Adult Education (other than technical or vocational) in Great Britain, and to make recommendations” – but to do so for our times.
- A series of research and educational projects around the history and record of adult education. We envisage a mixture of projects: small and large, funded and unfunded, national and local. Some might be conducted by educational organisations, classes and groups: for instance, the members of a WEA class might choose to examine the development of adult education in their own locality; a university department might suggest it as a topic for MA or BA projects.
- A series of archival and curatorial projects to preserve the records of adult education, and to make them more publicly accessible (through digitisation, etc.)
- A programme of activities, educational and “knowledge exchange”, which engage various publics in discussions about the role and significance of adult education. These will be overseen by a Steering Group which will co-ordinate the activities across all four themes, and maximise their impact.

We shall seek funding (from research councils, etc.) to support these activities. It is, of course, likely that funding will be partial: i.e., that we shall secure funding for some aspects, and not for others.

Our Invitation

We are therefore looking for expressions of interest in principle to join with us in this programme of activities. We would invite you to do so by emailing: Rosey@co-op.ac.uk.

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