

## Lessons for Neoliberal Times

### INTRODUCTION

This book set out to explore the impact of neoliberalism on adult educators, their work lives and their professional values. Its focus has been on England and New Zealand, two countries which, though geographically distant, have historical, political, economic and cultural commonalities whose origins lie in British colonial expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In England and New Zealand, as elsewhere, the development of organised adult education has been accompanied by contestation over its aims, content and pedagogy. One central issue for debate has been the extent to which adult education should be a force for social change, operating critically and independently of the prevailing political, social and economic order, or whether its efforts should be directed towards securing publicly funded provision. Linked to the question of publicly funded adult education have been debates about who should be enabled benefit from it, and what knowledge, skills and understandings should be prioritised in provision (CCCS 1981; Mayo and Thompson 1995; Thompson 1997; Foley 1999).

For over three decades from the second half of the twentieth century there was a measure of consensus in the industrialised world that adult education broadly defined, and for a range of individual, social and economic purposes, was the legitimate responsibility of governments. During this period a key concern was to encourage educational participation across all sections of society, but particularly among people who were

less likely to engage in education after leaving school – those who were unemployed and on low incomes, women with caring responsibilities, people with language and literacy needs, older people, people living in rural areas and those with the lowest levels of school achievement (McGivney 1990; Edwards et al. 1993). An approach which encouraged participation across the board enabled a range of adult education activities to be organised in both formal and informal contexts and sustained through the paid work of adult educators. They in turn were tacitly or explicitly influenced by diverse philosophical and theoretical positions and traditions – liberal, humanist and radical – which had been articulated through the struggles that surround adult education’s past.

Since the late 1970s, however, the consensus around adult education for personal, cultural and social, as well as economic development has been overshadowed by a new policy consensus stemming from the global spread of neoliberal ideologies into the educational sphere (Gordon and Whitty 1997; Bourdieu 1998; Apple 2000, 2001; Giroux 2003; Harvey 2005; Biesta 2016). This has resulted in policy shifts in adult education towards:

- Training and ‘upskilling’ for work – rather than education and training for a broad range of social, economic and individual purposes
- ‘Targeting’ of particular groups deemed to be in need of or education, rather than subsidised education for all those wishing to participate
- Marketisation of provision which does not meet tightly defined government funding priorities
- Participation in education and training viewed as an individual responsibility rather than a public good
- A focus on specifiable and measurable outcomes from education
- Tighter monitoring of the work of adult educators and of learner outcomes

These shifts have presented challenges for educators seeking to sustain working lives in adult education, as funding cutbacks and job losses have heightened their insecurity and uncertainty about the future. It has also changed the nature of adult educators’ work, presenting them with dilemmas about how to reconcile social justice values with the narrower, individualised and instrumentalist expectations laid upon them in the new policy order.

This concluding chapter revisits the findings from research conducted with adult educators in England and New Zealand in the context of the

changing ideological landscape described above. I begin by discussing some of the reasons adult education is no longer able to hold its ground as a discrete field of practice: its historical marginalisation which has left it in a weak position to defend adult educators as workers; the diversion of concerns about adult education as a field of professional practice towards – ultimately sterile – debates around professionalism; and adult educators’ reluctance to engage with theoretical and political questions, which has left them without the ideological and intellectual ammunition to combat a powerful and sustained assault from policies inspired by neoliberalism.

I call for the reinvigoration of a theoretically informed and critical analysis of how adult education – like other forms of education – is employed politically to sustain unequal economic and power relations. I discuss the ways in which the language of adult education has been co-opted to serve neoliberal ends, and argue for the importance of highlighting and challenging neoliberalised conceptions of adult education. I go on to discuss how the aims and purposes of adult education might be re-articulated in ways which go beyond unquestioned acceptance of economic ends, and which address instead the kind of society adult educators should be working to help create – one which prioritises democracy and equality over credentials and ‘skills for work’. Finally, I suggest some of the ‘on-the-ground’ strategies which might be adopted by those committed to education as a public and social good, and as a part of wider movements for equality and democracy.

### ADULT EDUCATORS AS PROFESSIONAL WORKERS

The historical reality of adult education as a field of work, for women in particular, is that it has been dominated by short-term, hourly-paid contracts and the expenditure of emotional labour, usually well beyond the employment contract. Full-time, permanent contracts are relatively rare and usually available only to those working in larger educational institutions (such as universities or colleges) or in national organisations. Casual, flexible work arrangements have suited some as a ‘fall-back’ career, rather than a main job. Moreover, the relative marginalisation of adult education has had its advantages in that, until more recently, it was less rigidly constrained by government policy than compulsory education or the college-based further education sector. This gave adult educators some autonomy to develop approaches to their work, influenced tacitly or explicitly by a range of adult education philosophies and theories. The

idea of ‘working in spaces’ which allows for adult educators and learners to define their own aims and purposes has been an attractive one.

However, this marginalisation has also worked against adult educators identifying themselves as members of an organised workforce. Ironically, too, adult education’s historical association with radical or socially ameliorating missions has brought with it a strong tradition of voluntarism in the sector, which has arguably militated against the usual forms of public sector worker organisation. It has been common (particularly for example in literacy and language teaching) for some adult educators to give their services without payment. Moreover, even for those employed as hourly-paid adult educators, the line between paid and voluntary work has often been blurred by the tendency to ‘go the extra mile’ for adults with whom they work. Taken together, these factors have left adult educators on the periphery of debates around educational purpose, as well as open to exploitation and poorly organised to defend their pay, their conditions of work and the quality of service they seek to offer. Against the background of a more generalised attack on public sector expenditure and its resultant impact on job security, adult educators have been extremely vulnerable to job losses.

Running alongside the deterioration in their working conditions and job prospects in both England and New Zealand have been government exhortations to adult educators to ‘raise quality’ through engagement in structured processes of accredited training, professional development and ongoing monitoring. These exhortations have been accompanied by promises of improved professional status and/or enhanced sector funding. In both countries, national organisations representing the interests of adult education and its practitioners have been implicated in the imposition of governmental forms of professionalism either through their involvement in the development of professional bodies for adult educators (as in England), or as contractors with government to coordinate professional development activities (as in New Zealand). While the concern of these organisations to raise the status and profile of adult education is legitimate, the extent to which ‘professionalisation’ has been enacted on managerialist terrain is problematic. In [Chapter 4](#), I argued that the notions of ‘professionalism’ and ‘professionalisation’ have been co-opted by governments in both countries for the purpose of performance management. Thus conceived, the idea of professionalism is far removed from the ideas of autonomous judgement, ethical practice and public service with which it has been traditionally associated.

In the wider field of education attempts have been made by writers such as Goodson (2003) and Sachs (2003) to re-assert ‘principled’ or ‘transformative’ forms of professionalism, characterised by individuals’ engagement with social and moral purpose, an ethic of care and a culture of collaboration. While such propositions have clearly been attractive to adult educators and those who represent them, they pay insufficient attention to the realities of adult educators’ working lives and the impact of the educational marketplace and performative regimes on their ability to claim space for the kind of activist professionalism which Goodson and Sachs propose. The portraits of English and New Zealand adult educators suggest that, by and large, they are already ethical, experienced and well-qualified practitioners who have the knowledge, skills and values associated with professionalism. This calls into question the value of the sector’s involvement with government-led professionalisation agendas which focus on assumed, but spurious, deficits on the part of individual practitioners. In the interviews for this research, adult educators rarely bemoaned their lack of professional status: their concerns were more often focused on lack of opportunities and resources – for themselves and for learners. The concern over professionalism expressed by governments – and some of the organisations which advocate for adult education – has diverted attention from the central issues: adult educators’ marginalisation as workers in a sector of education and their lack of collective power. It has favoured an agenda which places individual ‘standards’ and outcomes measurement above social purpose and reciprocity in relationships between educator and learner.

### PRINCIPLED PRACTITIONERS; RELUCTANT THEORISTS

In his discussion of what unites adult and community educators in New Zealand Robert Tobias (1996a: 59–61) suggests that, notwithstanding their varied work contexts and their different ways of interpreting their philosophy and purpose, they can still find common ground,

provided there is broad acceptance that a key goal of adult educators should be to work towards greater equality and social justice and an explicit recognition and acceptance of differences, there is considerable value in adult and community educators of widely different persuasions and backgrounds coming together to engage in dialogue and undertaking strategic political action and advocacy.

The evidence from the research undertaken for this book is that while there was no clear distinction between social and individually focused purposes, by and large adult educators' values were expressed in terms of a desire to promote equality of access and opportunity, to compensate for past educational disadvantages and (particularly in New Zealand) to foster social and community cohesion. Most saw a disjunction between their beliefs about the purpose of adult education and the instrumentalist, marketised and target-driven regimes under which they were expected to work. In this sense they did share some common philosophical ground from which they might seek to challenge neoliberal ideologies and policies.

However, there was a reluctance to engage with theory or with an analysis of the ideological and political context for adult education practice. This may reflect a more general contemporary disengagement from political debate in a situation where the belief that there is no alternative to public sector cutbacks and the market has become commonplace (Giroux 2001, 2003, 2006). It may also be indicative of the anti-intellectualism which has taken hold in the wider educational field, in which theory-based critique is cast as idealistic, unrealistic and even potentially dangerous (Carr and Hartnett 1996). Moreover, it has been suggested that adult educators tend to shy away from critical analysis of the philosophy and politics of adult education because they see themselves as 'practical people' concerned to get the job done, emphasising pragmatism and flexibility, and put off by what they regard as the alien language of theory (Coben 1998; Ledwith 2007; Bowl 2010). Whatever the reasons for it, this 'theoretical weakness' leaves practitioners without the means to articulate their purpose, beyond generalised value statements. In the research for this book, even where adult educators were willing to cite theoretical influences, their awareness of contemporary adult education theory was limited and sometimes partial. The most prominently cited influence was Freire. However, as discussed in Chapter 7, Freire's work was often interpreted with reference to individual, student-centred or humanistic approaches to teaching, rather than in the context of ideological and political struggles (see also Freire 1985; Allman 1988; Coben 1998).

This raises questions which I seek to answer in the remainder of this chapter. First, what theories and concepts are useful in developing a critical understanding of the politics of adult education in neoliberal times? Second, how can the aims and purposes of adult education be rearticulated to support arguments for education which go beyond individualism

and economic instrumentalism? Finally, I explore how adult educators as ‘public intellectuals’ (Giroux 2001, 2003, 2006) can work strategically alongside others to win back the ground lost to neoliberalism.

## TOOLS FOR A CRITIQUE OF NEOLIBERALISED ADULT EDUCATION

Although not mentioned by any of the adult educators interviewed for this book, Gramsci’s writings on the workings of hegemony provide the basis for a critical understanding of the politics of adult education in neoliberal times. The concept of ‘hegemony’ (Gramsci 1971) describes the way in which prevailing power relations are maintained through inculcating dominant values, beliefs, norms and discourses, which come to be viewed as ‘common sense’. Hegemonic discourses around education in New Zealand and England can be discerned in the view that public sector retrenchment and marketisation are necessary for national economic well-being, and in the widespread acceptance of the idea that the economy should be the pre-eminent driver of policy. In the field of adult education the fiscal stringency which has denied public subsidies to adult education, and the prioritisation of skills training for employability, which has narrowed the possibilities for adults wishing to engage with education, have remained largely uncontested in the responses of adult education advocacy organisations. Through a critical lens, however, political decisions to redirect resources away from broadly based adult education, in the name of ‘targeted’ funding for a narrow range of instrumental ends, may be seen as cover for a neoliberal agenda – which is indeed contestable. Esland (1990), Coffield (1999, 2000), Avis (2007) and others have offered evidence-based arguments which refute the assertions underpinning the narrowing of education to an economic and instrumentalist endeavour. Likewise, the notion that there is no alternative to public sector cutbacks is contestable, and contested (Fisher 2009; PCSU 2010; Hall et al. 2015); indeed it is persuasively argued that the global banking and credit crisis of 2007–2008 has been a pretext for the further embedding of neoliberal-influenced policies, such as public sector privatisation and disinvestment and cuts to welfare benefits (Hall et al. 2015). Far from being an economic necessity, ‘austerity’ has been a tool of neoliberalism. Given the pervasive nature of neoliberal ideas, evidence-based counter-arguments are unlikely to be located in policy pronouncements, or in the adult education

literature. They are more likely to be found in the publications of the critics of neoliberalism (Fisher 2009; Little (ed.) 2010; Grayson and Rutherford (eds) 2010; Hall et al. 2015). A reading of these texts suggests that, contrary to common-sense belief, there *are* alternatives to slashing public spending and that the revitalisation of progressive alliances is vital to achieving a new consensus which is not based solely on economic priorities (Hall and Massey 2010; Hall et al. 2015). Recognition of the operation of hegemony in relation to adult education opens up the possibility of counter-hegemonic action and enables one to argue, not just about the specifics of policy, the size of the funding cake and the slice which goes to adult education, but about the nature and purpose of education itself, and adult education's place within the educational and social field.

This has pedagogical implications. For Gramsci (1971) as for Freire (1972, 1973) the role of adult educators and their allies is to provide the conditions for people to reflect on their experience, placing it in a wider historical, social and political context, identifying those 'limit situations' (Freire 1972: 71) which are obstacles to progressive change, but which can be changed through collective action. A consideration of theory provides adult educators with the tools both for a critique of prevailing ideologies and policies, and for advancing progressive political and pedagogical practice. Gramsci's description of hegemony and of the difference between 'common sense' and 'good sense' understandings enables the unmasking of neoliberal ideologies and their influence on adult education policy and practice. The struggle to reclaim adult education for social justice is sustained through making visible the contradictions and injustices of current policies.

One of the ways in which neoliberal hegemony has been maintained is through the co-option and subversion of language. As I suggested in Chapter 2, there has, during the past 20 years, been a transformation in the language used to talk about education, including adult education. This transformation was reflected in the interviews for this book. For example, the 'learnification' of adult education (Biesta 2016) has entailed a shift in usage away from education, and the educator's role, and towards 'learning' and 'the learner'. While it may have signalled a welcome focus on the agency of the learner, this shift has an individualising effect, rendering invisible the relationship between education and learning and educators and learners. Furthermore, 'learnification' detaches the cognitive processes of learning from its content (Biesta 2016) thereby enabling questions of purpose to be evaded or substituted by neoliberal ends.



Critical questions which educators need to ask, therefore when discussing the specifics of adult education provision include:

- How are the cognitive processes of learning being conceptualised?
- What aims for learning are tacitly or explicitly articulated?
- What ends are being proposed – economic, cultural, social, individual?
- What facilitation and support are proposed for learning and the learner?
- What kind of pedagogy is implicit?

Similarly, the language of education for empowerment (Freire 1972) has been implicated in securing compliance to neoliberalism. ‘Empowerment’, which was widely used in the discourse of the adult educators interviewed for this book, pervades social work, business and even penal policy (see, for example, Hannah-Moffat 2000) as well as adult education. It has been co-opted by governments to shift the discourse of public provision from one of rights to one of responsibilities. Wright (2012) describes the *fantasy of empowerment* as it has been rolled out in UK education policy since the late 1970s. Empowerment, defined from a neoliberal perspective, has become imbued with individualised meaning and used as a tool for promoting education as a commodity. Individuals, through this new meaning, are to be empowered only insofar as they have the resources to choose from among the educational offerings in the marketplace. And if – through lack of money or through lack of success within the system – they are not able to capitalise on what is available, they are cast as responsible for their own disempowerment. Failure to gain prescribed qualifications becomes a personal failure to meet the demands of the ‘knowledge economy’. Failure to find work, even in the midst of unemployment crises, becomes a failure to secure the necessary ‘employment’ or ‘life skills’. The means to empowerment is training for work or the purchase of more qualifications in the educational marketplace. Empowerment has thus come to be construed as a personal responsibility and disempowerment an individual deficit.

Adult educators need to view their own claims to empower self-critically:

Concepts like participation, empowerment, social justice and equality are not just pleasant and friendly ideas but come from a participatory world view – one which is founded on cooperation and true democracy rather than competition and free market politics. (Ledwith 2007: 11)

Crucially, they should regard with suspicion all claims to empower, but particularly policy claims to do so (Ellsworth 1989). Questions around the use of the term empowerment which require critical scrutiny in an adult education context include:

- How are power (or the lack of it) being defined and by whom?
- What are the political and economic circumstances in which power differentials have arisen?
- Who authorises the adult educator’s power?
- To what extent does the adult educator possess power and in relation to whom?
- How are the outcomes of attempts to empower ascribed and assigned value?

Finally, few adult educators will have avoided exposure to the language of the market which now pervades discussion of the curriculum and teaching in which ‘learning packages’ are ‘delivered’, ‘programmes’ are ‘marketed’ and potential students have been re-cast as ‘customers’ (Mautner 2010). This marketised discourse is now so deeply embedded in the language of post-compulsory education (as it is within many areas of the public sector) that it is difficult to imagine a time when it would have been quite alien to a discussion of what should be taught, how it should be taught and to whom.

Reclaiming adult education for equality, social justice and democracy also requires critical examination of the discourses which surround it. One of the ways in which adult educators can raise questions about and resist neoliberalism’s influence is to subject to critical scrutiny the language they and others use in their daily practice and to question whether the discourse of learner-centredness, and learner empowerment (the language of humanist and radical adult education) can truly be reconciled with the discourses of ‘curriculum delivery’, ‘education markets’ and ‘learners as consumers’, and how education and learning are conceptualised within these discourses.

## REARTICULATING ADULT EDUCATION FOR ‘A GOOD SOCIETY’

Since education plays a major role in the process of social reproduction, any debate about contemporary educational policy cannot avoid some discussion about the kind of society that education should foster and promote. To discuss what the future shape of society should be is to raise issues about the nature of the ‘good society’. (Carr and Hartnett 1996: 27)

Any attempt to recover adult education from the neoliberal hegemony must move beyond critique to articulating alternatives. Since education both reproduces and is shaped by societal relations, integral to any discussion of the future of adult education are questions about its moral and social purposes, the kind of society it is aimed at (re)producing and whose/what interests it should serve. These questions are political and, as such, contested. The reality is that it is not possible to ‘go with the flow’ of a marketised approach to adult education without conceding that equality is compromised; inevitably, in a market, those who can afford the most highly valued opportunities will tend to prosper educationally (and ultimately economically and socially). Below I suggest a set of propositions which address the role of adult education in the social sphere, based on the *common ground* suggested by Tobias (1996a: 59), by those whom I interviewed in the course of undertaking this research and through my own reflections on the current condition of adult education. If, as Carr and Hartnett (1996) suggest above, educational aims are ultimately bound up in discussion about the nature of the ‘good society’, then I suggest that the fundamental role of adult education (and education in general) is to contribute to creating and sustaining societies characterised by democracy, dialogue, equality and respect for differences.

#### **Re-articulating Adult Education: Some Propositions**

- Education is first and foremost a public, not a private good. A society in which individuals are encouraged to pursue their own private economic interests through education cannot be reconciled with ideals of democracy and equality.
- Forms of education which have as their primary aim the distribution of life chances by the creation of winners and losers in a competition for qualifications are unlikely to promote equality since ‘winners’ will almost certainly be those who are already advantaged through the operation of an unequal distribution of pre-existing social, cultural and economic capital.
- There *are* alternatives to the current dominant conceptualisations of adult education as a marketised commodity whose role is narrowly defined in terms of economic advantage; debate around philosophies and theories of adult education is a vital foundation on which to build new conceptualisations.

- Education should seek to enable all individuals to develop their understanding of how political systems and institutions in their society work, how they can voice their views and how they can contribute to creating democratic social change. This necessitates educators and learners engaging in critical debate in which all are free to participate on an equal footing.
- Education can never be ‘neutral’ or apolitical since it is implicated in the (re)production of economic and power relations.
- Dominant conceptualisations of adult education have their roots in the struggles and compromises of history. An understanding of the history of adult education and the contestation of ideas which has characterised its development is essential to understanding its present condition.

### ADULT EDUCATORS AS AGENTS FOR CHANGE: TACTICS AND STRATEGIES

There is little doubt that the space for adult educators to exercise agency in the current policy climate has become severely constrained. Targeting, outcomes measurement and tighter monitoring have reduced their room for creative and flexible working. Job insecurity has introduced an element of risk into efforts to challenge ‘common sense’ ideas about the pre-eminence of economic goals and the privatisation of adult education provision. This state of affairs engenders a sense of fear and powerlessness and may lead some educators to direct their efforts towards accommodating the current policy order (for example around the imposition of fees) by finding ways to turn constraints to advantage. However, local strategies of accommodation are unlikely to be successful in the longer term, since they tend to distort the values on which many adult educators premise their work, drawing them into another value system and giving rise to confusion and demoralisation. Moreover, tactics of accommodation are likely to fall foul of relatively minor changes in policy or personnel. The policy changes which adult educators face go well beyond adult education – and well beyond one country. They are not amenable to local resolution.

Nevertheless, in different ways, some of the adult educators interviewed for this book were engaged in tactical work to hold on to, or even extend

the boundaries of the shrinking terrain of adult education. They were taking advantage of ‘agentic moments’ to enact micro-resistances to confound or subvert policy prescriptions, again at the local level. ‘Dodging and weaving’ or ‘working outside the box’ involved making on-the-ground judgements about how to resist policy in practice. Such resistances require considerable confidence and critical reflection on the part of the resister. Because they demand a lot of the individual they are likely to be easier for adult educators who are experienced and whose work is underpinned by a strong sense of values. While the possibilities and limitations of micro-resistances need to be carefully weighed in the balance, they nevertheless keep open a space for considering approaches to adult education other than those currently dominating the policy scene.

In [Chapter 9](#), I considered some of the strategic organisational responses to the current crises in adult education, their strengths and limitations. In England and New Zealand cross-sector strategic alliances and focused campaigns have been mounted in an attempt to influence policy. Strategic alliances vary in the extent to which they involve educators and learners. In England the CALL campaign had some (albeit short-lived) success in mobilising grass roots practitioner support. In New Zealand, the strategic alliance for adult and community education was largely confined to high-level policy work and approaches to government departments and politicians. Experience from the international development field suggests that strategic work enacted principally at a policy level is likely to have limited impact unless it is backed up by public and media pressure ([Leipold 2000](#)). Organisations which focus on developing dialogue with government run the risk of incorporation into its agendas if they fail to keep sufficient distance from government concerns, and particularly if they are themselves dependent on government funding. They also risk alienation from their grass roots if they fail to build their strategies from the ground up, or to ensure that communication channels to the grass roots have the same kind of priority as the development of ‘back channels’ for communication with government.

The strength of campaigning is that it can catch a moment of public concern and organise rapid and vocal responses which may embarrass, persuade or pressurise for change. Implicit in public campaigning is the potential to link with other issues in the wider political arena as well as promoting collective ‘learning in action’ ([Foley 1999](#)). One of the lessons of the 1960s and 1970s is the way feminist, anti-war and anti-apartheid campaigns built confidence, engendered wider debate and fostered

alliances with other campaigns which enlarged the space for further debate and action and the development of radical ideas and approaches. Movements for equality and democracy go hand in hand with educational activity (Allman 1999, 2001). But public campaigning, without a clear and credible alternative vision which links to wider public concerns, is unlikely to be effective or sustainable. Advocacy and campaigning strategies, coupled with the development of evidentially and theoretically informed argument, all need to be mobilised in the service of movements for change. Below I suggest some of the features of successful advocacy and campaigning, based on the interviews with adult educators and the literature which discusses advocacy and campaigning strategies in the contexts of international development and the broader field of education.

#### **Some Features of Successful Advocacy and Campaigning Strategies**

- They are inclusive of learners, educators, organisations and the wider public.
- They have clearly articulated aims developed through debate and consultation.
- Campaign concerns make the links with underlying political and economic causes.
- They are able to respond quickly and coherently to policy developments.
- They build awareness of underlying issues and promote ‘learning in action’.
- They link deliberately with other campaigns – national and international.
- They utilise research to generate evidence.
- They maintain independence from government influence.
- They actively rebut the opposition’s arguments.
- They are highly interactive.
- They build on the expertise of all involved.

On their own advocacy and campaigning around adult education will not change the global agenda. However, they can raise awareness, activate people and – most important – can link with wider debates and campaigns around neoliberal-inspired policies at a global level. Adult educators are workers and citizens; like many of the learners with whom they work, their

livelihoods have become increasingly insecure. Perhaps at no time in the last 20 years has it been clearer that the ideology on which neoliberalism rests does not operate in the interests of working-class or unemployed people. Nor does education – whether first or second chance – any longer guarantee employment or a prosperous future. Campaigns to protect education as a right for all cannot be divorced from the campaigns of others, and resistance cannot be maintained successfully in the context of the classroom, the institution or the sector alone (Giroux 2003; Hatcher 2007).

### SUMMARY: WHERE IS THE ‘NEW TERRAIN’ IN THE STRUGGLE FOR ADULT EDUCATION?

Griff Foley, from his perspective as a long-time adult educator in Australia, throws out a challenge to critical adult educators:

We can capitulate and become more efficient managers of learning for capitalism. We can nostalgically and ineffectually bemoan the decline and death of earlier traditions. Or we can fight on new terrain. Foley (2001: 84)

One of the conclusions of this book is that the space for practitioner agency is, in reality, limited. But that is not to underplay the importance of adult educators (indeed all educators), in their daily practice, challenging the ways in which the ideologies, policies and the language which circulate around adult education and training operate against democracy, equality and social justice. There also is a place for research which evaluates and documents educators’ tactics of resistance and highlights what can be learned from their engagements with the day-to-day dilemmas of practice in neoliberal times (Foley 2001). Similarly the potential for advocacy and campaigning around adult education is yet to be fully exploited, and there are lessons to be learned from these ongoing efforts, some of which have been suggested in this chapter. Therefore a further role for research, in support of advocacy and campaigning work, is to continue to investigate the evidence base for neoliberal claims about the links between training for employment and the development of a ‘knowledge economy’, and to monitor the social impact of the withdrawal of public funding from adult education.

While the impact of neoliberal ideas on adult education in England and New Zealand may differ in the detail, the outcomes for adult educators as

workers have been remarkably similar. Not only these two countries, but also Australia and parts of Europe and North America, have been affected by the commodification and marketisation of education along with other public services. Indeed the globalisation of these ideas is at the heart of the neoliberal project. The tendency towards parochialism in adult education practice remains strong, in spite of the accessibility of information about international developments assisted by the spread of new technologies. Academics and those working at senior levels in national adult education organisations have ready access to intelligence about the international dimensions of adult education. One little-mentioned professional development need of adult educators, which can be met by their representative bodies and by adult educator trainers, is the cultivation of an international perspective. While willingness to take understandings from Freire's work in 1970s Brazil and elsewhere was apparent in interviews with adult educators for this book, more recent developments in popular adult education in that country are in danger of being over-looked (Kane 2000, 2010; Hall et al. 2015: 6).

The fate of adult education is inextricably bound up with the global economic and political order. Responses to attacks upon it therefore need to be global – and political. The reluctance of adult educators to engage in theory and politics is fatal: the need to engage in debate about the purposes of education is more pressing than ever. Yet I would argue that this debate is more likely to be successful if conducted outside the spaces in which adult educators seek an, ultimately empty, individualised form of professional status, and it must be conducted independently of government. Moreover, the struggle for education as a public and not a market good needs to be undertaken in partnership with others who are engaged in arguing for the public provision of education alongside adequate health care and social welfare (Hall et al. 2015). Maintaining traditions of critical and radical adult education outside the state is equally important. In this respect the rebirth of movements for popular education and 'people's universities' have been encouraging (Neary and Amsler 2012). Educators, along with public sector, anti-poverty and anti-racist campaigners, environmentalists and trade unionists need to link together to determine what kind of education, what kind of society and what kind of world we – as adult educators and learners – want.