CHAPTER 16

Sustainability and Community Initiatives: Where is the FE Sector?

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Introduction: Motivations

This chapter deals with some of the issues surrounding attempts to widen participation in education for adult students from local communities and to use issues allied to the sustainability agenda as a vehicle for their engagement. This is a particularly difficult and complex topic and what follows is not a definitive exploration, rather an overview of the particular historical antecedence of the role of adult education, followed by a case example of projects that highlight some of the current challenges and the very real problems surrounding such implementation.

If you have ever studied when over the age of 19 years of age, the chances are that you too have been, or are, defined as an 'adult learner'. Consequently, this presents a good opportunity for you to think, not in the abstract about your motivations, but to consider your own experiences in relation to this area. Before continuing it may be useful for you to consider the specific example of yourself. On occasion throughout this chapter it will be necessary to talk to you directly, to help you consider your own wider aims and motivations for learning in the context of adult learning. To begin with then, what were the motivations that brought you to further study? Perhaps you have one eye on the employment market, or perhaps you were just drawn to further learning. Of course these two motivations are not the only ones, nor are they mutually exclusive, but they do introduce two important, and increasingly disparate, areas of adult education, namely vocational- and/or skills-based learning based around

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the further education (FE) sector and a broader educational, possibly even non-certificated, area of provision, tending to be based around adult education centres. At times on a down turn of the seemingly cyclical priority of funding in adult education, it is really no surprise that the latter experiences the greatest pressure, and yet historically this is where the origins of adult education lie (Field 2006).

R.H. Tawney (1880–1962), described by Elsey (1987) as the patron saint of adult education, argued that social justice was inextricably linked to widening participation in education (Hinden 1966). He saw the great social movements of the nineteenth century as also great educational movements (Taylor 2007). Interestingly, in his writings on education, not only does he point out the importance of adult education as a means of achieving social justice, but also talks of the commitment of those delivering such classes, suggesting that such involvement is driven by more than any personal gain, and that these teachers 'become partners in a universe of interests', (Tawney 1950, p.6). He was also on the executive of the Workers Educational Association (WEA) for 42 years and often taught adult groups, who were described by Kelly (1970, p.254):

> They came in search of knowledge, not certificates, and their interest was principally in political and social subjects … The enthusiasm and determination of the students was tremendous.

A review of R.H. Tawney's work provides an interesting philosophical base, not only on community involvement but also with more contemporary concerns relating to sustainability education. Most intriguing are two observations that still resonate: the commitment of teachers and the enthusiasm of students (Tawney 1950). Furthermore, Tawney's views on education now appear highly apposite to the contemporary transformative approaches that are increasingly called for in sustainability education (Sterling 2011). The following passage epitomises Tawney's thoughts on education:

> the process by which we transcend the barriers of our isolated personalities, and become partners in a universe of interests which we share with our fellow men, living and dead alike. No one can be fully at home in the world unless, through some acquaintance with literature and art, the history of society and the revelations of science, he has seen enough of the triumphs and tragedies of mankind to realize the heights to which human nature can rise and the depths to which it can sink. (Tawney 1966, pp.87–88)

For him and his contemporaries, education was about transcendence; adult education in particular was a primary mechanism for collective liberation, what we are more likely to call 'social justice' today. These characteristics of transformation and empowerment are also necessarily at the heart of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Furthermore, the contemporary discourses around sustainability also highlight the centrality of social justice to its achievement (Evans 2012; Coote 2015). Therefore, the antecedence of adult education is strongly identified with transformative learning and provides an effective mechanism for the promotion of social justice and participation.

There are contemporary government statements and policy documents that appear to advocate this type of approach to teaching and learning in FE. For example, the Green Paper 'The Learning Age' (DfEE 1998) set out the then new government's priorities for adult education. The foreword talks of 'The fostering of an enquiring mind and the love of learning' being essential prerequisites for a successful future. In the introduction of Section 2, it argues 'the development of a culture of learning will help to build a united society' and that learning provides benefits on a number of different levels. At the individual level, learning 'offers excitement and the opportunity for discovery. It stimulates enquiring minds and nourishes our souls'. At a community level, learning 'contributes to social cohesion and fosters a sense of belonging, responsibility and identity'.

It was a powerful, widely welcomed paper by those employed in the further and adult education sectors. Such sentiments not only resonate with the views of R.H. Tawney, but are closely allied and complementary to approaches associated with the social and community aspects of ESD. What resulted from this Green Paper will be discussed shortly, but before that, it is important to note that the ideas put forward in 'The Learning Age' were influenced by the conclusions of an earlier highly influential Government report, 'Inclusive Learning' here, referred to simply as it became known, namely the Tomlinson Report (1997).

While the Tomlinson Report (1997) dealt primarily with issues concerning those students with disabilities and/or difficulties associated with learning, it recognised, especially in the FE sector, that there was a need to respond by providing routes, not into special classes, but into mainstream provision. This would necessarily require a refocusing of teaching and learning that would be based on the requirements of the individual, so-called 'inclusive learning'. Within the FE sector, inclusive learning was not only concerned with physical access to facilities and courses, but the redesigning of provision in terms of organisation, assessment and, most

importantly, teaching and learning. It needed to provide at an individual level for the learning styles and requirements of all students, traditional and non-traditional. In short, it was not simply about widening door frames; it was about widening learning, challenging the status quo and traditional perceptions and assumptions.

This is a very important point, as in other educational contexts, inclusion will often be related to social inclusion, promoting community involvement and local engagement (Florian 1998; Rosenthal 2001; Blandford and Gibson 2005). However, additionally, the emphasis in the FE sector was to relate to inclusive learning styles within the institutions.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, policies were in place; therefore, that not only attempted to widen access and community participation but also encouraged the adoption of innovative and inclusive teaching and learning approaches, both of which would promote the sort of approach well suited to the promotion of sustainability. This was accompanied by a marked and impressive increase in adult participation (HEFCE 2008).

However, despite this, there was, and still is, a significant difference that has come to dominate the underlying aims of adult and community education. The view that adult education is a tool for emancipation and social justice has seemingly been replaced by a substantial emphasis on economic imperatives (Gorard and Rees 2002). This formed the primary argument central to the influential Learning Works Report, that later simply became known as the Kennedy Report (1997). This report suggested that social justice could be achieved through economic participation and that by this people would be empowered to take an active part in the economy and therefore wider community. Of course the broad concepts that concern sustainability education are not necessarily divorced from such economic expedience. Indeed, the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Strategy Document (2010) 'Skills for Sustainable Growth' talks clearly for the need of skills to build a sustainable future. However, despite this, the inclusion of sustainability in taught curricula still perhaps relies more on the commitment and creative thinking of the particular lecturer than the so-called hard outcomes of vocational programmes. Since 2005, there has much greater emphasis in the FE sector on vocational training (Summers 2007).

What has resulted is a system dedicated to greater inclusion and participation, but one that is very much based on skills, particularly vocational ones. The provision of vocational education and training is unquestionably valuable, yet, there is the danger of losing sight of the equal value of non-vocational adult education. The push for skills and training outlined in Skills for Growth (2010) has come to dominate many aspects of adult provision. Particularly

as funding in recent years has moved away from adult education and has resulted in a drastic reduction in courses being offered (Tucket 2008).

Box 16.1:

It is very important for you to reflect on the following questions:

- What are the values of non-vocational adult education courses?
- How can adult education provide the approaches and requisite skills that a resilient and sustainable community need for the future?
- How can we design in such skills to existing provision?

Case Study: The Parents as Educators Programme

The following case example will hopefully help you formulate some views as the aims of this programme were not vocational. There were learning outcomes, which concerned 'understanding' and 'application' but there were also deeper, less easily evaluated, emergent outcomes based around notions such as confidence, overcoming the stigma associated with learning and promoting social networks and participation. The Programme Co-ordinator discussing her involvement in the 'Parents as Educators' (PaE) programme best sums it up:

> *we just wanted a course that would let young* parents learn how to be with their children and with each *other.* (Desira 2003)

To reach these groups and promote such courses, particularly as they are not 'vocational', needs specific strategies, and such strategies and their relative effectiveness are discussed here through an illustrative case example.

The PaE programme was set up in the city of Norwich, UK through a local FE college. It was developed in response to an invitation for bids to run Local Initiative Funding Projects from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), who provided funding to the FE Sector at that time. The initial idea was to develop a programme for parents to help with their children's learning, particularly in the areas of nature and the environment and basic support in mathematics. The primary aim was to support parents to support their children. The secondary aim was to help these young parents themselves gain confidence in learning, thereby encouraging them to progress on to further mainstream course programmes.

Getting Going

> Three out of four girls that went on the course are not normally those that will participate in things, but were prepared to because of the way the Project Co-ordinator had built a relationship with them and the one we had with them allowed us to encourage them, so it was a case of different agencies working together … they liked the course … at least two of them have decided to go on and do other courses. (Response from a partner organisation to PaE)

To briefly explain the significant amount of work that goes into such developments is a difficult task, but any bid for funding from the local LSC was placed against national priorities and would normally result, as it did here, in something of a negotiation between the funder and the provider. Furthermore, to draw income from different agencies, aspects of the programme needed to be modified and adapted to meet the funding criteria of each. The complexity and frustration involved in making such bids was significant, as were the changes that had to be made to the original programme. However, the programme emerged with constraints on recruitment. These are given in Table 16.1.

The original bid was proposed in September and rewritten in November, verified by the Open College Network (a UK accreditation body) in February and started properly in March with the appointment of a programme manager. It took six months of work to secure a £70,000 budget.

Box 16.2: Points to consider:

- The lead in time from the initial idea to its realisation was 6–7 months. Most FE colleges have a cyclical course approval deadline. How effective is your institution in relation to rapid responses?
- What you set out to develop may not be the course that you had envisaged. Consider what you may need to compromise over.
- Course administration can be very heavy. Is your institution in a position to take on more administration?
- Consider some of the opportunities new developments create for you in terms of new community projects?

The Course Design

> many of the group had had fractured schooling and the last thing I wanted to do was to put them off learning by throwing loads of ideas at them. I just wanted to get them used to thinking a little deeper and being confident enough to talk. (Course Tutor)

The course was for young parents with children of primary school age and was verified at both L1 and L2. The students would carry out the kinds of activities in relation to environmental studies that their children would do in class. The programme was to be a practical 'hands on event' one morning a week for eight weeks. The sessions were to be informal, yet informative, fun to be part of and directly relevant beyond the classroom. The students had an additional debrief session to inform on the educational purpose of the activity. There were free discussions where the parents were encouraged to reflect on and evaluate the activity. They were then encouraged to carry out the activity with their own children and to attempt to further evaluate its potential worth through practical application.

This evaluative feedback formed the first session of the following week's class. A new activity was then carried out, and once again the parents were encouraged to evaluate it by carrying it out at home.

Recruitment

Within the time constraint of a project, collaboration with other organisations is one of the most important aspects to working with excluded groups. Contacting groups is the easy part however, what is more difficult is making collaboration productive. This requires openness and planning, as similar provision can sometimes be seen as competition between organisations. Such relationships also require parity of status—small community-based organisation are just as important, if not more so, than an FE College or a local University. Regular contact needs to be maintained and a shared commitment is needed to make things work. Lack of time is a very real pressure point here, in terms of both the lifespan of the project and the time that staff from external organisations and team members can commit.

Table 16.1 Recruitment Constraints

- Wards with the highest number of young parents who had not obtained Level 2 (L2) qualifications were to be targeted.
- Parents needed to be under 25 years of age.
- Parents could not have previous L2 (or higher) qualifications.
- 90 students was the target recruitment.
- 20 students needed to complete CLAIT Plus at L2 (a basic IT qualification)

With the PaE programme, the most successful recruitment strategy was through direct contact. A travelling activity workshop was developed and, working with local primary schools in the identified districts, toured around these schools, putting on learning activity fairs immediately after school hours. The hands-on nature of the activities ensured a very high attendance. This, in a rather underhand way, was something of a ruse, as although it was good for the children, it allowed other team members to approach waiting parents. This was the primary point of contact and was subsequently identified as the most effective marketing method (Desira 2003). In this way, groups of young parents who were, if not friends, then at least familiar with one another and were encouraged to take part. Getting groups of parents from these schools was one of the most effective recruitment tools for this project.

Probably the greatest pressure point with widening participation projects is actualising recruitment. Difficult to reach groups are so called for a reason, and sometimes, despite great amounts of work, potential clients do not enrol and targets are not met. The published literature will always concentrate, understandably on successful projects, but it can give the impression that somehow recruitment is straightforward and easily achieved. This is rarely the case. In that context and with the pressure from funding agencies, and managers, each with their own targets to meet, realising that recruitment on a project is not strong can be a significant source of stress.

Unlocking the Door

The obstacles to returning are difficult to classify into groups, but a broad range of physical or mechanical restraints, such as finance (simply being able to afford it), childcare, travel, employment, home care

commitments. Each one of these needs to be considered carefully during programme development and the bid must include mechanisms to negate these obstacles.

Another range of potential obstacles to returning to education may be more social, or cultural. These are often recognised and discussed, but tend to be the issues that as practitioners we can do least about. Cultural pressures on any individual can be summarised as the degree by which the decision is seen as 'abnormal' by friends and relatives. Such reactions can be powerfully dissuasive, even to the extent of simply excluding FE as an option. Even to a lesser extent, negative comments at home, socially or in the workplace, (even jocular ones along the lines of 'you're wasting your time') can become at best wearing, at worst self-fulfilling. Returning to learn can mark you out and as such lead to feelings of isolation. It is also a high-risk strategy. To study and to test oneself so openly and then to fail may result in some sort of confirmation of a sense of failure.

Most commentators would suggest that confidence, however defined, is the key to at least addressing some of these problems and one effective way around a sense of isolation or lack of confidence is to encourage and foster a close group atmosphere. It is one of the most well-worn truisms of FE to say that the single most important source of support for returning students is that given by other students. This programme did find a number of approaches useful, and some of these are given in Table 16.2.

Table 16.2 Promoting confidence on the PaE Programme

- Not taught at college, teach at local school if accommodation is available, or outside.
- Empowerment of students—adult returners' last experience of education was school. They need to feel like adults. It sounds obvious, but it is vital to treat them as such. Their experience should be as distant from a school environment as possible.
- It is important that the staff team engage with the students in an informal, non-intimidating way.
- Provide academic support. We also arranged talks from the adult guidance team.
- Be flexible in terms of delivery. One way is to not overfill the curriculum. Build in plenty of review time and tutorials. Respond to requests.
- Have fun in the sessions particularly outdoors.
- Place stress on personal goals and concentrate on positive feedback.

The 'R' Word: Retention Issues

Probably the best advice for any new lecturer in adult education is to get used to discussing retention. Keeping students on a programme or a course is equally as hard as getting them on to the course in the first place.

The problem is a difficult one, and it is compounded in the first instance quite simply by the fact that adults have complex lives. Childcare arrangements collapse, children fall ill, personal or social situations change. A young, particularly single parent's life can suffer from variable and unforeseen pressures and when these mount up, it is understandable that the course is the first thing to suffer. Sometimes, particularly on higher-level courses such as an Access to Higher Education course, it can sometimes be the case that a student will struggle with the workload and will increasingly feel overwhelmed, at which point all the original anxieties and the lack of confidence will return. Having a tangible 'problem' outside of college is, to a degree, a face-saving way of leaving the course without having failed. The problem this presents us as tutors is that as students leave for valid extraneous reasons, it may very well hide significant flaws in course design.

Unfortunately, retention will always be more likely to effect adult education, and it is an issue that is difficult to address. Pre-course interviews are important in terms of pointing out to potential students some of the stresses they may experience, but of course paradoxically, at the same time, the interviewer is actively encouraging the student to enrol. In reality, the relationship between recruitment and retention is rarely the inverse; however, an interesting question to consider is, how far do concerns about retention and completion rates act as yet another obstacle to participation?

There is a growing literature on improving retention rates (Thomas et al. 2003) and the topic is too complicated to discuss here, but certainly tutorial support, differentiated outcomes, individual learning plans, in fact all the components of good 'inclusive learning' help to retain students.

Evaluating the Programme

Exit interviews formed the basis for feedback and intended follow-up sessions, and throughout these interviews, one constant theme emerged, namely that of an associated improvement in the student's personal confidence. Indeed, all students mentioned this, and 89 % of the cohort, by the time of interview, intended to return to some form of full-time or part-time education.

However, by June of 2003, the pilot programme had recruited 35 students, yet the target had been 70, meeting only half of the target figure. Of the 35 students, only 26 completed the course and, as a result, missed its enrolment targets, and nearly a quarter of the students did not complete. Therefore by measurement of recruitment and completion, the two most common forms of evaluation in FE, the programme failed.

However, this programme was also evaluated using qualitative methods in an attempt to explore the perceptions and experiences of a 'purposive' sample of the staff team and students. Purposive sampling allows cases to be selected to illustrate particular features that may be of interest (Silverman 2000, p.104). To consider some of these read through the following comments:

Box 16.3:

To consider an alternative means of evaluating the programme, read through the comments given by some of the participants in the course.

> We walked down to the park and just chatted … it was good to just sit and talk about stuff. So yes, it was a good time. (Student)
>
> It was quite interesting, it was funny, we had a laugh you know. It was quite relaxed … a lot of it was group work and we sort of chatted about it in groups rather than working alone and that was good, because we were all just discussing things freely. (Student)
>
> It's quite good really, to know what the children are doing at school and you can actually help them at home … You can talk about things … It's changed my confidence in helping the children learn about the world. (Student)

Think carefully about the conclusions you may draw from these quotes about the deeper outcomes of the programme.

Conclusions on the Programme

> It made me want to go to do bigger things now … it's got me back to College again and that's something I was really nervous about doing, so I think that's the biggest thing actually … it's got me back here, more confident. (Student)

Perhaps when evaluating such programmes, we need to look beyond the prescribed learning outcomes and think of the wider outcomes that

may emerge. Do we design programmes that are inspirational and promote the desire for further study and improve confidence? If we heed the calls for new approaches in ESD, how transformational are our programmes. It is an important point to consider as this is precisely what widening participation in adult education can seemingly provide. It can be a genuinely transformative learning experience that may empower individuals and communities and promotes genuine participation.

A short adult education course such as this may not have radically changed people lives, but it promoted the confidence to ask and to question, to develop a sense of real inclusion to the point where it was 'OK to laugh'. The participants became comfortable with each other—and with themselves. The importance of such community programmes is that sustainability necessarily requires inclusion. These young parents came onto this programme to help their children learn. They had concerns about the world their children may grow up in. They wanted to influence that world and they needed the confidence and the opportunity to do so. Community-based programmes such as PaE sometimes have ill-defined outcomes, but nevertheless, although elusive and subtle, they are crucially important.

In the same way that adult education was seen as a vital to social and political change in the past, today, community-based programmes may well present a same vital function in the promotion of genuinely wider inclusion and wider empowerment in the transition to a more social, equitable and sustainable future.

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Further Reading

In this area of social and community development as part of the sustainability agenda, the following texts are noteworthy.

An American, somewhat homespun, perspective on practical community involvement that has particular insight for the UK may be found in

Sarkissian, W., Hofer, N., Shore, Y., Vajda S., & Wilkinson, C. (2008) *Kitchen Table Sustainability*: *Practical Recipes for Community Engagement with Sustainability*. Earthscan Tools for Community Planning

An interesting debate concerning connecting education-based reflections on sustainability with the real world may be found in Juker, R. (2014) *Do We Know What We Are Doing*? *Reflections on Learning*, *Knowledge*, *Economics*, *Community and Sustainability*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Although nearly ten years old, an excellent review may be found in Blewit, J. (2006) *The Ecology of Learning. Sustainability*, *Lifelong Learning and Everyday Life*. Abingdon: Earthscan.