In our end is our beginning: spirituality and the role of the adult educator

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Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated …
Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
… In my end is my beginning. (T.S. Eliot, East Coker, 1940)

Starting

Metaphors of travelling and exploring have long underpinned the discourses of adult education and lifelong learning. Indeed, the international SCUTREA conference in 2001 was entitled Travellers’ Tales. It marked a pivotal moment in what the call for papers referred to as ‘a paradigm shift from adult education to lifelong learning’. Lifelong learning had undoubtedly become the flavour of the times but, as the editors of the proceedings noted, contributors to the conference differed ‘in their assessments of the possibilities of lifelong learning within the wider framework of globalisation, consumer capitalism and fragmenting cultures’ (Miller and West, 2001, pp.15).

Dawson (2001, pp.83), for example, argued that lifelong learning had become ‘an accelerating treadmill of applied initiatives to meet the purported needs of the global economy, all driven by the latest economic developments and newest technological trends’. She chose, therefore, to turn to T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets and ‘the slower pace of poetry’ to consider lifelong learning ‘not as a mode of hyperactive doing but of existential being and becoming’ (ibid, original emphases). She felt that Eliot’s work provided ‘an opportunity for approaching familiar themes with new eyes, and fresh appreciation’ (ibid).

For similar reasons, I shall also draw on Eliot’s imagery, specifically that contained in the opening quotation to this paper, to explore the role of the adult educator (not all of whom, I acknowledge, are either old or men!) and the place of adult education within a newly-emerging discourse of spirituality. Personally, I find many resonances within this discourse with themes that have long shaped my educational practice – perhaps because, as I grow older and ever-closer to the end of my own journey as an adult educator, I am simply seeking to make sense of what it has entailed and where it has brought me. Nevertheless, for reasons which I shall outline, I want to suggest that spirituality is a discourse that no adult educator should now ignore.

Whither or wither?

Messages

Since 2001, in the UK at least, there has been considerable pessimism not only about the
acceleration of the lifelong learning ‘treadmill’ but about what has already been crushed beneath it. As the call for papers for the present conference notes: ‘figures on adult participation in education in 2006 show a decline in non-vocational education, which is marked. Moreover, liberal adult education has been in steep decline for some time’. The roots of SCUTREA itself, in university adult education, have been particularly badly affected as repeated ‘applied initiatives’ throughout the higher education sector have resulted in adult education departments being downsized and closed – despite the fact that most were rapidly re-branded as lifelong learning departments as the treadmill encompassed them in the late 1990s. In this context, I wondered whether the title of this conference might more appropriately be: ‘Wither adult education in the learning paradigm’!

If we know not whither adult education is headed, nor, indeed, whether it will soon wither altogether, then, as the call for papers suggests, some answers may be found in the ‘remarkable explosion in individualised, self-directed and autonomous forms of learning that have occurred without involving adult educators’. One feature of this apparent shift to a ‘learning paradigm’ that seems to me to contain some powerful messages is the proliferation of ‘self-help’ and modern ‘quest’ literature.

Self-help literature

Tennant (2002) provides a useful analysis of the pedagogies for personal change contained within the former, noting that: ‘Whatever the problem the solution is the same: to focus internally and discover, unearth or otherwise construct a more independent, autonomous, freely-choosing self’ (pp.266). The first step towards self-help is thus to develop a degree of self awareness. Such development is well-understood within adult education. However, its encouragement within the self-help literature seems to be framed not so much by the culture of empowerment, in which most adult educators seek to operate, as by the culture of enterprise where, as Tennant points out, ‘learning for change’ is endemic since it readies both workers and leaders to take on new identities and practices that will better serve their organisation and the global economy (pp.268).

It is tempting to suggest, therefore, that widespread interest in self-help literature signifies the triumph of the enterprise culture and provides popular endorsement of current government policies which privilege efficiency, effectiveness and economic prosperity - and which, via associated funding priorities, have already resulted in the ‘withering’ of much traditional adult education provision. Alternatively, as Ecclestone et al. (2005) would no doubt claim, the appeal of such literature could be regarded as symptomatic of a ‘therapeutic culture’ which encourages ‘diminished’ individuals to cope and survive rather than to challenge oppressive structures within their lives.

In either context, if the proliferation of self-help literature is a symbol of the learning paradigm its message is bleak: in the enterprise and therapy cultures that breed/need this literature, there is little call, using Martin’s terms (2006, pp.286), for an ‘intellectual and ideological space where the flowers of argument about meanings and purposes and causes could grow and flourish’ – for the kind of space once occupied by what he calls ‘a certain kind of adult education’, and adult educator, concerned with transformative learning and issues of social justice.

Modern quest literature

However, the growing interest in modern quest literature may signal a different message. These texts are less concerned with the help that a either a ‘freely-choosing’ or a
‘diminished’ self might need in order to function better in a marketised and/or therapy-dependent society than with seeking meaning and value in human existence itself, including the life of the individual. Like self-help, quests also require an internal focus but usually acknowledge the individual self as an integral part of a larger whole. They involve an awakened sense of consciousness in the world rather than the conceptualisation of the world and of one’s place and ability to function appropriately within it. They engage with mysteries that, for many people, cannot be wholly explained in material terms. Thus, quest literature tends to be more about ‘being and becoming’ than ‘doing’. In essence, it addresses issues of spirituality.

There is now considerable evidence of a so-called ‘spiritual turn’ in Western societies. For example: in an editorial to The Edge, a journal published by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Smith (2006) recently pointed to a range of ongoing research which suggests that ‘While conventional religions are in decline, the search for “spirituality” is on the rise’; a simple internet search on Google as I was writing this paper brought up 56,800,000 references to spirituality; Wikipedia hosts an extensive, multi-linked entry on the topic; and most High Street bookshops now feature large displays labelled ‘Mind, Body and Spirit’ (in one North American store alone, English et al. [2003, pp.5] counted 38 different categories for ‘spiritual’). The proliferation of modern quest literature appears to be part of this spiritual turn, indicating a hunger for deeper understanding that is no longer satisfied either by the traditional teachings and rituals of organised religions or by other formal educational institutions and processes.

In this context, the learning paradigm in which many adults find themselves seems to be an ill-defined space where an often poorly-articulated search for spirituality – for meaning and value in a world becoming, in Eliot’s terms, ‘stranger and more complicated’ as the security of tradition dissipates – is circumscribed by powerful messages from government, educational institutions and commercial enterprises (including self-help books) that learning, meaning and purpose are to be pursued via a technicist agenda that values outer-directed, measurable and ‘doing’ skills above all else.

I once heard John Heron speak about the soulless nature of many institutions and organisations that are bound by this agenda. Using a metaphor that I have often since brought to mind when institutional imperatives and bureaucratic requirements have become overly-oppressive, he suggested that, if you look closely enough, in every institution, policy, job, or situation, you can find small cracks where, with care and attention, you can grow flowers. I think this may be the message for adult education contained in an increasing interest in spirituality and signified by the popularity of modern quest literature. Together, these constitute a crack in the encircling walls of the enterprise and therapy cultures. The space thus opened may be ill-defined but it may yet be big enough to allow us to re-plant and grow our ‘flowers of argument about meanings and purposes and causes’ – and to rediscover what Martin (2006, pp.286) fears we may have lost: the soul of adult education.

Who goes there?

The need to address spiritual matters is already clear within many other professions. For example, there is a statutory requirement on schools in England to ‘promote pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development’ (DfEE/QCA, 1999, pp.11); the Nursing and Midwifery Council’s Standards of Proficiency explicitly require nurses to have skills to meet the ‘spiritual needs’ of patients (NMC, 2004, pp.5); there is a growing body of literature relating to spirituality in social work (Moss, 2005), counselling (Moore and Purton, 2006), mental health (Swinton, 2001), healthcare practice (Robinson et al., 2003) and
ethical decision-making (Robinson, 2007); the uses and abuses of workplace spirituality are well-documented (e.g. Fenwick and Lange, 1998) and a Foundation for Workplace Spirituality has recently been established.\(^4\) As Dearey notes:

> The study of spirituality as a dimension of professional practice … has emerged since the mid-1980’s. The challenges vary from fundamental questions of how to think about and study spiritualities, to more practical problems of how to identify and provide for the spiritual needs of service users (Dearey, 2006, online).

One consequence is that a number of universities now host ‘Spirituality Centres’. However, these are often associated with specific professions or disciplines and, to date, there have been few opportunities for academics and professionals to come together across their respective disciplinary, professional and international boundaries to explore common issues and concerns, either in person or in print (much of the writing in the field is also published in discipline-specific journals and texts). This lack of joined-up thinking across traditional boundaries means that the concept of spirituality (in both religious and secular forms) and its application in practice is inadequately theorised. Also, as McSherry (2006) points out in the context of health care, there is a danger of spirituality becoming secularised within a number of separate professional discourses and, as a result, not only of failing to engage directly with the perspectives, values and needs of either service users or providers, but also of being redefined as a yet another ‘thing’ to be managed and assessed.

Within the UK, an attempt is currently being made to set up a British Association for the Study of Spirituality and discussions are taking place about the possibility of creating a new journal in which to bring together such studies. The purpose of the journal will be to create an international, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary forum for the exchange and debate of research, knowledge, wisdom and insight relating to spirituality and contemporary spirituality studies. Its underlying premise will be that ‘Human beings are essentially spiritual creatures because we are driven by a need to ask “fundamental” or “ultimate” questions … to find meaning and value in what we do and experience’ (Zohar and Marshall, 2000, pp.4). However, it will also acknowledge that many people seek guidance and resolution for such questions within religious traditions and teachings while others prefer to do so within a humanistic framework, often shaped by principles of social justice; and that some may reject the language of spirituality altogether but espouse what might be called ‘spiritual values’ in their lives and work. It will recognise, too, that there are dimensions of spirituality to which predominantly cognitive answers about ‘meaning and value’ cannot easily be found, including lived-experience of awe and wonder.

At the time of writing I cannot predict how successful these plans will be – but there is a strong sense that the time is right for such developments and I think it is particularly appropriate that adult educators should be involved in them because...

**In this end is our beginning**

Significantly, as English and Gillen (2000, pp.2) note: ‘the spiritual quest – is not unique to the current times. Pioneers in the field of adult education … drew on thousands of years of spiritual thought …’. English et al. (2003, pp.13-17) trace some of these roots and point out that:

> Adult education and training began with leaders who believed their very work was, in itself, spiritual. Our historical mentors did not separate their spiritual sides from their work. … Somewhere in the past fifty years adult education and training have become
more about teaching techniques and learning styles than about inspiration, aspiration and consecration. Separating the spiritual from the educational might be a safer approach to practice, but it is short-sighted in terms of human need and innate human understanding (op.cit., pp.19)

Between 2004-2006, I convened an ESRC seminar series entitled *Researching spirituality as a dimension of lifelong learning* (RES-451-26-0008) (Hunt and West, 2006). Discussions overwhelmingly supported the conclusion reached by English et al that educational processes, as well as the lives of educators and learners, would be greatly enhanced by the (re)introduction of Goethe’s concept of *Bildung* - the cultivation of new faculties of seeing which ‘involves paying full attention to the whole so that we and those within our community are transformed’ (op.cit., pp.150).

Before I draw on seminar participants’ own words to illustrate this, it may be helpful if I first comment briefly on the seminars themselves. Their purpose was not so much to examine and generate research about spirituality as to explore reflexively participants’ personal experiences and understandings of spirituality. Rather than privileging intellectual debate, as often happens in academia, we wanted to engage with lived and embodied experiences of spirituality. Analysis of the records of, and responses to, the seminars suggests that spirituality may perhaps be understood most simply as the deepest form of meaning-making with which people shape their lives: it is the most basic idea that we think with rather than about; an idea that ultimately gives form to our world and our identity. Some participants were comfortable with the idea of something ‘outside’ the known and knowable universe which penetrates and animates that universe, others were not; but, in both cases, our findings endorsed that of Fleming and Courtenay (2006, pp.126): ‘spirituality was repeatedly explained or described in terms of connection’.

The experience of such connection appeared to be sadly lacking in participants’ everyday work contexts where time pressures and external demands often resulted in fragmentation of tasks, relationships and/or aspects of the self. As one participant put it: ‘In our institution there is … completely manic management and total demoralisation – the whole situation is fairly desperate!’: Perhaps it was not surprising, therefore, that participants often referred to the ‘nourishing’ and/or ‘inspiring’ space created by the seminars, and how different this felt from being at work. The following extracts from some of the written responses to the seminars are typical:

1) I left feeling amazed and inspired by the way people treated one another -the respect and valuing of one another which is a contrast to daily organisational life. I welcomed the opportunity to be in that environment.

2) I left feeling very excited that I’d found a way to unite all parts of myself and my work. I discovered that the connection was ‘me’! I also left feeling inspired to draw explicitly upon my spirituality in my teaching and my research, rather than to hide it as something not ‘valid’ in academic/professional space. Hearing from other people who are doing similar has definitely increased my knowledge and confidence.

3) The deeper the sharing, the deeper the listening, the more absolute the respect, then the greater the value and impact of the experience. It is as though, when people are gathered together, and are communicating in this way, a profound sense of the interconnection between those present is experienced.

So many such comments about the neglect of ‘whole-ness’ and relationship (*Bildung*) in educational practice beg questions that I will pose in conclusion by drawing on the words,
with which I started, of both Eliot and Dawson: As adult education has ‘grown older, the
world stranger, and the pattern more complicated’, has the ‘accelerating treadmill of
applied initiatives’ carried us so far from the origins of adult education that it has, indeed,
as Martin (2006, pp.286) asked, ‘lost its soul’?

As employees within an economic system, adult educators have little choice but to be ‘still
moving’ with the treadmill, even if we know not whither it is headed. Nevertheless, as we
react to the increasing ‘intensity’ of economic, technological and bureaucratic demands, let
us also ‘be still’ and consider the possibility – already expressed in popular literature, other
professions, and in seminar sessions – of ‘further union, a deeper communion’ with who
we are as human, spiritual, beings; and what our spirituality means for the way in which we
enact our role. For the founders of adult education: ‘spirituality animated their work and
their educational practice lent direction and focus to their spirituality’ (English et al.,
2003, pp.19). In our beginning, therefore, should we not now seek, if not our end, then our
future?

After all, ‘Home is where one starts from …’.

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Books.


Notes

1 ‘Self-help’ literature is about implementing change in a particular area of one’s own life in order to become more ‘successful’ in relationships, finance, career *etc*. Modern ‘quest’ literature has a more spiritual dimension. Often influenced by the archetypal themes of traditional quests for the Holy Grail, it is based on a search for deeper meaning and value in life generally. It usually advocates both work on the self and acknowledgement of something *beyond* the self: examples range from the ‘Insights’ of Redfield’s *The Celestine Prophecy* series, via the questions posed in Gaardner’s *Sophie’s World*, to texts, like Tolle’s best-seller series based on *The Power of Now*, which contain practical guidelines to aid spiritual exploration and understanding.


4 See: [http://www.workplacespirituality.org.uk][3/4/08]

5 Prange (2004, pp.506) notes: ‘The concept of *Bildung* is a latecomer in a long line of spiritual independence versus material circumstances tearing us down to considerations of earthly well-being. Education is for now, *Bildung* is for ever’.

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