The role of university adult education tutors in England in the inter-war years

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Introduction

In 1928 a group of influential adult educators defined the aims of adult education as:

not to give the student a better place in the labour market, but to give him \((\text{sic})^1\) the opportunity of living a fuller and more interesting life, and to equip him for more intelligent citizenship … the primary object is not that the learner shall earn a higher wage, nor even that the community shall be supplied with better professional carpenters and gardeners; but that the learner may enrich his life by finding new interests and new means of self-expression (Carnegie UK trustees, 1928, p1)

This philosophy was fundamental to many who worked as adult education tutors in the inter-war years. This paper will use both published and unpublished sources to look at the role of university adult educators in the years between the First and Second World Wars, particularly tutorial class tutors. University adult education policy and practices will be considered briefly, including the 1919 Report which set the tone of adult education for decades. The paper will also look at the organisation of extra-mural education, particularly the tutorial classes, by Joint Committees of universities and the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA).

Adult education policy

The 1919 Report

In July 1917 a subcommittee of the Committee of Reconstruction was set up ‘to consider the provision for, and possibilities of, Adult Education (other than technical or vocational) in Great Britain, and to make recommendations’ (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, p207). Within a week it was redesignated as a full committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction and its Final Report emerged two years later, being published on 14 November, 1919. The committee’s terms of reference set the official seal of approval on non-vocational education. It is possible to argue that the pattern for adult education in the inter-war years – and even beyond – was drawn up by the committee, not only in its precise recommendations but in its general tone. Wiltshire has suggested that the importance of the Report lies in its general pervading influence:

It can be said to have created ‘adult education’ in the sense that it established it in our consciousness as a distinctive domain of education, elucidated its ethos and purposes, made us aware of it problems and possibilities, and described in some detail its characteristic modes of teaching and organisation (Wiltshire, 1980, p23)
The Report emphasised the importance of voluntary activity and the significance of education for democracy and saw the tutorial class as the ideal means of delivering the education.

**Tutorial Classes**
To many of those involved, adult education in the inter-war years meant tutorial class work, which was seen as 'decentralised University work of the highest quality.' (WEA, 1918, p271) The 1919 Report described the functions and organisation of a tutorial class as:

- a body of men and women not exceeding 32 in number who agree to study a subject chosen by themselves under a teacher supplied by a University Joint Committee for a period of three successive years; to hold 24 meetings of two hours each in each year (usually between Michaelmas and Easter); and to do the necessary reading and to satisfy the tutor as regards essay work. (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, p190)

The essential features were continuity of study, the combination of free discussion with a lecture and the mutual assistance and co-operation of the students with each other and the tutor.

- Continuity of study ensures that all points of view are represented and expressed, and corrects the bias of the teacher or of any section of the students. The spirit of mutual assistance gives the class a corporate life which is educationally more valuable than much formal instruction. (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, p190)

**Universities, Joint Committees and Extra-mural Departments**
During the inter-war years the formation of extra-mural departments became widespread and the organisation of adult education through joint committees was the norm. This was partly due to the philosophy of the tutors themselves, who, from their largely middle-class standpoint, believed it the best way of helping the working class students. The tutorial class movement can be said to have begun with Tawney's historic classes at Longton and Rochdale. The system of Joint Committees dates from the same time when the Report on Oxford and working class education recommended that committees be set up, consisting of between five and seven representatives of the University and an equal number of members representing working-class institutions and organisations, appointed through the WEA. The formation of joint committees occurred throughout England as recommended. Further extra-mural departments were set up, until, as Kelly has pointed out, by the outbreak of war, the only English universities without either an extra-mural department or a director or similar official to co-ordinate the work were Sheffield, Leeds and Reading. (Kelly, 1992, p269)

**Perceptions of the role of the adult education tutor**
Contemporary views of the role of the adult education tutor in the inter-war years inevitably varied.

**The Carnegie Report**
In 1928 the Carnegie UK trustees published their report *The tutor in adult education – an enquiry into the problem of supply and training*. The Report was drawn up by a committee appointed by the British Institute of Adult Education and the Tutors'
Association in response to Sir Eustace Percy who in 1926, as President of the Board of Education, had questioned whether sufficient qualified tutors would be available to meet an increase in adult education.

The Report pointed out the main differences from other types of teaching. Obviously, the student body would be different, and so must the methods employed by the tutor. The success of the class, the committee argued, was to be found in the activity and contribution of the student.

The tutor must learn how and when to efface himself. He must be prepared, by careful planning and experiment, to stimulate discussion, to keep it relevant, and to guide it without any appearance of abruptness (Carnegie UK trustees, 1928, p10)

He must regard the class not only as a whole in itself, but as a collection of individuals. 'The tutor will often find it desirable to talk with students individually or in twos and threes before or after the class meeting, or at other times and places.' The recommendation was somewhat vague, but the committee returned to the subject and urged that the tutor should get to know his class outside the 'hours of regular meeting' so that he could learn about the environment from which they came, how they formed their opinions and thus come to appreciate their outlook.

This was particularly important when the class consisted of industrial workers. In classes of this type personal knowledge of the social and industrial conditions of the students, and some knowledge of working-class organisations and their aims are of the utmost importance.' (Carnegie UK trustees, 1928, p25)

The Report suggested that:

social gatherings and other enterprises undertaken in common afford the best opportunities for breaking down the barriers of reserve and creating the confidence which is necessary for successful team work. (Carnegie UK trustees, 1928, p25)

The other enterprises were not specified, but would no doubt include excursions with groups of students to sites of historical or other interest and such organised activities as rambles. Examples of excursions were recorded frequently in the records, including, for example, the tour of the Co-operative Society laundry undertaken by a group of Leeds students. The social gatherings were also varied, including amateur dramatics, beetle and whist drives and musical evenings.

The Report argued that the tutor working for a university or voluntary body must expect to undertake other duties in addition to teaching. These would include propaganda work, for instance in providing a single lecture or short course in a new centre, or in taking a weekend school. In addition, when a new class was in process of being formed, the tutor should organise meetings to aid recruitment. It was also his task to stimulate an interest in the movement in new students so that they would play an active role. As one class approached its end, he should be thinking of new classes to replace it. In an almost casual manner, the Report added that many tutors take an active part in summer schools – not only those conducted with tutorial classes, but also with less advanced work (Carnegie UK trustees, 1928, p25)
Part-time tutors must have been relieved to learn that they were not expected to play as active a part in these duties as their full-time colleagues, although they were still required to help with the preliminary organisation of a class and some propaganda work. (Carnegie UK trustees, 1928, p25)

The Committee decided that it was ‘impossible’ to state a list of standard qualifications which tutors should possess – apart, of course from the ‘obvious’ facts that they must know their subject, be able to teach and be adaptable to the ‘particular circumstances’ of each class. For the more advanced classes a good honours degree or its equivalent was desirable, but tutors who had obtained ‘a sound knowledge’ of their subject in other ways should not be rejected. A tutor should also possess knowledge of subjects closely connected with his own and:

Finally, he must be alive to the main social, industrial, religious and political questions of the day and their bearing on the interests of his students. If he has been able to gain some first-hand experience of an occupation similar to those in which most of his students are engaged, this will be a great advantage. He must at least read widely and should, if possible, travel. Above all he must keep himself always fresh and up-to-date. (Carnegie UK trustees, 1928, p27)

It is important to remember that that the committee was not sitting in judgement on a group of people about whom they knew nothing. Virtually all of them had experience of teaching adults, many in a tutorial class setting. They were well qualified to express views on the ideal tutor, though of course it is impossible to state how nearly they lived up to their own recommendations. Many, of course, were in the part-time tutor category and therefore spared the full commitment demanded of full-time staff; it is to be assumed, however, that they set some sort of example to their colleagues.

Yorkshire tutors’ views
The dedication of many tutors to their work was matched only by their enthusiasm for the WEA and all it represented. The Association stood out among educational providers for the emphasis it placed on the spirit of the movement, closely linked to its voluntary nature; these, and apparent changes in the essence of this ‘spirit’ have been discussed relentlessly. Throughout its existence, the WEA has indulged in both soul-searching and nostalgia. It is no doubt advisable to avoid complacency; the repeated exercises in self-criticism by members of the Association have, over time, led to improvements in method and approach.

In January 1927, Ernest Green, at the time still Secretary of the WEA’s Yorkshire District, commented to a gathering of Yorkshire WEA tutors on the ‘considerable amount of discussion within recent months as to whether the W.E.A. was retaining the spirit it had and with which it was initiated.’ (WEA, 1927) Green reminded his listeners of the ‘treble mission’ with which the WEA had come into existence: first, to consolidate the efforts of various voluntary organisations which had grown up to stimulate the demand for education; secondly, to try and obtain from the Board, the LEAs and from other educational bodies the ‘facilities for Further Education and to get these authorities to recognise their responsibility for such Education’ and finally, to try and stimulate the demand amongst the workers themselves. (WEA, 1927) The actual teaching of classes was implicit.
Green went on to describe how the ‘phenomenal’ growth of the WEA had resulted in the introduction of tutors who had not grown up with the movement. In some districts, there were now tutors who could not do their work efficiently, because they did not understand the reason for which the work had to be done.

I think you will recognise that there are two very important qualities which every tutor must possess. He must be able to inspire as well as to teach and that is why academic qualifications do not count for everything in our work, because after all we want men whom students will have every confidence in, whom they feel they can get inspiration from and who will recognise that they are part of a large voluntary movement, and their work is to act as a link between the individual units and the larger District concerned. (WEA, 1927)

It was the tutors’ responsibility to act as a connection between class, branch and district. While some did so there were still:

- a great many tutors who take no interest in their class apart from the fact that they prepare their subjects, give the lecture, leave the class and meet the following week on the same terms. (WEA, 1927)

One tutor, Green reported, did not know the names of many of his students after taking a tutorial class for three years: ‘that kind of tutor is not the slightest use to the W.E.A.’ The ideal tutor was one who maintained contact with his students during the summer months. Green recalled a complaint from one tutor who took a tutorial class that ‘his class was organised in a rotten way.’ It turned out that the tutor had not made the acquaintance of his students until the first meeting. ‘That is no good,’ Green argued, ‘His business was to strike a contact in the summer months.’ A man appointed at the end of July should have taken steps to familiarise himself with the class ‘and not write to complain that the class has been organised in a rotten way when he had not taken the slightest interest in the students.’ The students should be able to drop in on the tutor during the summer months. One exemplary tutor had invited his students to his house during the summer, a few at a time, given them cups of tea and ‘talked over their various difficulties and their personal matters.’ (WEA, 1927)

The tutor must recognise the importance of cultivating a personal relationship with all his students; Green described how in one case the class had disappeared because the tutor did not show the same interest in all members of his class. A lively debate ensued, with several tutors agreeing wholeheartedly with Green’s views.

J.R. Taylor had taught classes in Edinburgh for two years before coming to Yorkshire in 1916. He pointed out that as anyone who had moved about the country during the previous ten years was aware, the W.E.A. was still a very different thing in different parts of the country. Edinburgh and Leeds were possibly the two extremes. In Edinburgh he had had little involvement with the association. Then he came to Yorkshire and found there was a movement:

- I had come down quite frankly thinking that I was going to have a good time in the winter with an number of interesting classes, having great discussions on social and economic questions, and then disappear in the summer time. (WEA, 1927)
He had ‘never dreamt of any other possibility’ but during the first summer somehow found himself taking a voluntary class at Keighley in trade union problems. ‘I wondered if I was a fool, but somehow I could not help doing it. It was the Yorkshire atmosphere.’ Similarly he taught at Whitsuntide summer schools and weekend schools. (WEA, 1927)

Taylor had his own opinion of the WEA’s *raison d'être* which echoed Green’s: it was, he believed in existence to express and to stimulate the desire for serious education. He reminded his audience that the WEA had always taken the view that it wanted people to definitely look at the social results of education rather than to consider primarily the possible benefits to themselves. Thus, where a class was a ‘real’ WEA class the tutor would see that WEA business was discussed in class and would understand the origin and structure of the WEA. In addition, and less predictably, he suggested that the tutor should read the newspapers and periodicals which his students read, the *Daily Herald*, for example, and Lansbury’s *Weekly*; he should know about the working class movement in general.

Another tutor, G.W. Gibson, returned to the pastoral side of a tutor’s work:  
My own job is a very varied one. It is like acting as a parson in his parish, doing all kinds of things. I find myself taking an interest in their pig clubs etc. in East Yorkshire. I think it is the job of the tutor as far as possible to live among his students, to know their interests, and by so doing you can set up a strong bond of affection between yourself and the students. (WEA, 1927)

*The Board of Education view*

The Board of Education *Report on adult education in Lancashire and Cheshire* for the period ending July 31st 1928 set down some of the ‘official’ views. It argued that the demands made of tutors in the early days of tutorial classes had lessened by the late 1920s. While ‘an encyclopaedic knowledge and exceptional dialectical gifts’ were still ‘almost a necessity in dealing with keen but raw students’ some difficulties had been eased by twenty years work: the academic point of view was now more easily grasped and the outlook of intra-mural and extra-mural classes was more similar than previously. (Board of Education, 1929, p18)

The records of a meeting held at the Board of Education in May 1936 indicate another ‘official’ view on the employment of tutors in the inter-war years. Surprisingly, it was reported that His Majesty’s Inspectors came down heavily in support of part-time tutors and ‘were of the opinion that the employment of more full-time tutors should not be encouraged.’ (PRO ED/80/13) It was believed that the average full-time tutor was inferior to the average internal university lecturer who was also doing part-time adult education work, ‘adult education wherever possible should be done by p.t. people, using f.t. tutors only where absolutely necessary’. Their reasons for this verdict are somewhat unexpected:  
The job of a f.t. tutor is not an attractive one, it has no prospects, and consequently the field of recruitment is very poor. Further, quite apart from material prospects the job is not a desirable one, as the limited contacts and the usual requirement of hot gospelling on behalf of the movement tend to warp the mentality. (PRO ED/80/13)

**Conclusion**
Faced with the alarming future described by the Board, it is remarkable that anyone was willing to take up a job as a full-time tutor, but fortunately many did so. With their part time colleagues, they took their role very seriously indeed.

In praising, A.D. Lindsay, her mentor and role-model, Alice Cameron defined what she and many of fellow tutors saw as the ‘ideal’ tutor of the inter-war years:

He did not seek to make more or less successful scholars of them ... nor yet ... to compensate them for the secondary education which they had missed, nor to lead them into any political fold. He did not regard them as backward schoolboys or undergraduates, but as adult experienced men doing important work in their own field, whom he counted it not only an obligation but a privilege to assist, helping them with his knowledge and intellectual capacity to understand what puzzled them, so that they could do whatever they wanted to do (cited in Scott, 1981, p73-74)

Note
1 With some reluctance I have not added the word ‘sic’ whenever appropriate throughout the paper as I believe this would be intrusive, given the number of occasions it would be required

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