The ‘impact’ of adult education on disciplinary knowledge: classics and history in twentieth century Britain

John Holford, University of Nottingham, England

Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

Introduction
What is the ‘impact’ of adult education? Today, adult educators are asked to evaluate how their provision allows universities (and other bodies) to have an impact on society outside the academy: for example, on the workplace, the economy, or communities. This paper contests this view of knowledge generation by exploring the role of adult education in two university disciplines. It suggests that when universities engage with adult learners ‘outside the walls’, ‘impact’ can be multi-directional and surprising.

At the Oxford Conference on the ‘Higher Education of Workpeople’ (1907), John Mactavish made an influential speech: universities had in the past restricted their entry to ‘the fortunate few’, but he regarded university education as ‘a right – wrongfully withheld’ from the working class: ‘I decline to sit at the rich man’s table praying for crumbs’ (quoted Mooney 1979). Over the next 2-3 decades, leading universities established tutorial class programmes which continued until the 1990s.

We know a good deal about the history of adult education: the quantity of provision, and the policy debates which led to the growth and decline of such work through the twentieth century. We know too little, however, of the interactions between adult education and university disciplines. What impact did adult education have on disciplinary ‘knowledge’ – in adult education, and in the universities themselves? Steele (1994, 1997) offers the only major study, exploring adult education’s role in the growth of Cultural Studies. There is evidence (varying from anecdotal to substantial) on the role of adult education in fields such as economic, social and labour history (Thompson 1963), industrial relations (Holford 1994, Lyddon 2003), politics and international relations, and the environmental sciences, but these areas have not been explored in depth. This paper contributes to redressing this by exploring and comparing the role of Classics and History in British adult education. Classics and History are, of course, closely related disciplines: many classicists are Ancient Historians; disciplines such as Archaeology and Palaeography are relevant to both; a knowledge of Latin was long regarded as an essential tool for historians – as late as the seventeenth century, after all, much important work was written in Latin, as Milton and Hobbes could testify.

Classics in the formation of workers’ education
Two educational movements dominated workers’ education in twentieth century
Britain. The Workers’ Educational Association, formed in 1903, happily still prospers. The Labour College movement, founded five years later and its rival to the left, closed in 1964. Both were profoundly shaped by images of the classical world; but decidedly different images.

**The Labour Colleges**

The longest-lasting classical allusion in British adult education lay in *The Plebs’ Magazine*, the monthly magazine of the labour colleges, published continuously from 1909 to 1969. Initially this was an organ of the Plebs League, founded in 1908 by striking students at Ruskin College, Oxford, and of the Central Labour College which they formed the following year. Why did the Ruskin strikers choose this title for their league and its magazine? Amid all the studies of working-class education and Marxism, few historians seem to have wondered about this. Millar’s account is:

Most of the [striking Ruskin] students had recently read and admired *Two Pages from Roman History*, a well-known American socialist pamphlet that drew a parallel between the struggle of the plebeians in ancient Rome to overcome the patricians and the contemporary struggle between the workers and the propertied class. It seemed apt to apply the term plebs to those who, in 1908, upheld the principle of education for workers by workers. (Millar, n.d., 7).

Craik provides a little more detail. The name, he says,

was derived from a brochure written by the American Socialist Labour Party leader, Daniel de Leon, entitled *Two Pages from Roman History*. In it was outlined one of the class struggles in the ancient world, the struggle in early Rome between the property-owning patricians and the propertyless plebeians. (Craik 1964, 62)

De Leon’s ‘brochure’ (or ‘pamphlet’) in fact ran to 89 pages – over 27,000 words. It was certainly a revolutionary tract. Roman history pointed to the impending crisis of capitalism. But, *pace* Craik and Millar, he was not drawing general parallels between ancient Rome and the early twentieth century class struggle. His knowledge of ancient history was not superficial. He focussed on two periods. In the first, 500-400 BC, ‘the Roman Commonwealth was forged awry into a weapon of eventual national suicide’ (p. 54). During the second, the Gracchan period around 100 BC, Rome had, he argued, ‘passed the stage of reform’ (p. 63): there were ‘no longer “institutions” in existence’; they had become ‘shadows’; there was ‘nothing but usurpation: in such circumstances nothing short of revolution is in order’ (p. 64).

De Leon’s message was about leadership and organisation in revolutionary (in today’s parlance, social) movements. For founders of a movement for workers’ education, there was a key message from the earlier period about the leaders of the plebs. ‘Picked bourgeois plebeians ... were allowed the privilege of a seat in the Senate’, but their ‘hobnobbing ... with patrician aristocrats ... relieved not one of the economic burdens complained of by the plebs’ (p. 19). In the later period, there was a message about organisation. The Gracchi ‘had been tutored from infancy by Greek rhetoricians’; their ‘rhetoric pleased, entertained, swayed’. ‘At the first serious shock,’ however, their forces melted away ....’ This was because rhetoric could not
organise. ‘Organization is a prerequisite of the Proletarian Revolution’ but ‘its organization must be marked with intelligent co-operation.’ (p. 84) In this perspective, the Ruskin strikers’ choice of ‘Plebs’ as their standard seems to refer less to the desirability of ‘education for workers by workers’ (Millar, n.d., 7), than about the need for a college which would educate leaders intelligently committed to the proletarian cause.

Unfortunately, we know rather little about the how far classical topics figured in labour college programmes. There were some classes, for sure: when, in 1912, the Edinburgh no. 1 Branch of the National Union of Railwaymen asked the Central Labour College (CLC) to provide them with a course, the subject chosen was ‘A Marxist interpretation of prehistoric archaeology’: 35 railwaymen attended (Challinor 1977, p. 25). When the Scottish Labour College started a course in Bathgate in 1926, it was on ‘Early Social Development’: 42 enrolled. But these are, at best, tantalising straws in the wind: the main studies of the labour colleges are silent; and even for these classes, we know nothing of what went on.

**Universities and the WEA**

The Ruskin strike took place against the background of Oxford University’s developing engagement with the WEA. The report, *Oxford and Working Class Education*, appeared in 1909; it is generally seen as laying the foundations of the ‘partnership’ between universities and the WEA in adult education which was to last for most of the twentieth century. This story is usually told in terms of Mansbridge, and sometimes MacTavish, on the WEA side; and a group of younger, reforming Oxford dons within the University. For many working class extension students, classical literature and the ancient world clearly formed part of the allure of education; so too for Mansbridge. Classics was part of ‘the canon’:

> There are miners and factory hands in the North who don’t care twopence about increasing their wages or living in bigger houses or wearing finer clothes, but who can discuss Greek history with men like Alfred Zimmern, Greek poetry with men like Gilbert Murray and Greek philosophy with men like W.H. Hadow [an Oxford classicist, later Vice Chancellor of Sheffield].
> (Mansbridge, quoted in Goldman 1995, 83)

Mansbridge later gave Alfred Williams (the ‘hammerman-poet’ of Swindon, self-taught in Latin and Greek) iconic status in his work (Mansbridge 1940). Rose (2001, 223-230) suggests we should see this as part of a claim to the ‘right to language’ – that Classics was a key signifier of membership of the cultural elite. He alludes to the occasion when Balfour used a Latin term in the House of Commons: Will Crooks, who loved Homer in translation, reminded him that some Members had not had the privilege of a classical education (p. 226).

**What do we know of the Oxford dons who supported working class education?**

United in and around the ‘Catiline Club’, they included Alfred Zimmern of New College, William Temple of Queen’s, Richard Livingstone of Corpus Christi, J.L. Myres and W.H. Fyfe, with R.H. Tawney who was not an Oxford don ... lending assistance from the outside. (Goldman 1995, 109)
The general account of their motivation is cast in terms of the English idealism of T.H. Green and late Victorian notions of Christian mission (e.g., Goldman 1995, esp. Ch. 2). Yet they were also all Classicists: Zimmern’s *The Greek Commonwealth: Politics and Economics in Fifth-century Athens* appeared in 1911; Myres was Oxford’s Professor of Ancient History from 1910; Temple, later archbishop of York and Canterbury, having taken a First in Greats (Classics) at Balliol in 1904, immediately took up a Classics Fellowship at The Queen’s College, Oxford; Livingstone, to become Vice Chancellor of Queen’s University, Belfast, President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford and Vice Chancellor of Oxford, but a prominent and popular writer on education and classics, was already a Classics Fellow at Corpus Christi; Fyfe, later Vice Chancellor of Queen’s University, Kingston, and of Aberdeen University, was Classics Fellow at Merton College, Oxford, 1904-19. Tawney’s later fame as an Adult Educator and Economic Historian obscures his discipline of origin: he graduated in Greats in 1903. Others leading WEA and university extra-mural tutors were Classicists by training: G.D.H. Cole and Margaret Cole, for instance (Cole 1949).

In fact, however, it seems to have been the very exceptional worker-scholar who enthused about the Classics. In its survey of tutorial class provision in 1907/08 to 1918/19, the Ministry of Reconstruction’s Adult Education Committee found that the first university tutorial class in Ancient History was organised in 1918/19: but it was only one out of 153 classes that year (Cmd. 321, 1919, p. 195). During the period 1923-1929 in Kent, the WEA organised two ‘terminal’ or ‘sessional’ classes in ancient literature in 1926/27 (in Rochester and Gillingham); the Gillingham class clearly took off, studying Greek literature and Sanscrit literature over the following two years. But of its 34, 35 and 37 classes across the county in these three years, no other was on any Classical topic. No London or Oxford tutorial class in Kent addressed the Classics between 1918 and 1929 (Baker 1931). None of Nottingham’s tutorial or sessional classes between 1920 and 1926 was in Classics. Zimmern himself bemoaned the lack of enthusiasm for Classical subjects in workers’ education (Stapleton 2007, p. 278).

So on the face of it, Classics played a part in shaping university and WEA adult education, by shaping the enthusiasms of Mansbridge and his supporters. Yet there is surely more to it than this. Reading Zimmern’s *Greek Commonwealth*, one can hardly miss his interest in economics and the world of work; nor of his idealisation of craftsmen; nor his emphasis on self-government and democracy. This was Hellenism for the working class. Livingstone posited Athens as a timeless ideal; he used it very emphatically to argue for adult and workers’ education during the second world war.

*Hellenism Revived: Livingstone, the WEA and Citizenship*

At this point, let us note that while Classics courses in adult education may have remained few, Hellenistic influence on adult education had a decided revival during the Second World War. This resulted chiefly from Livingstone’s work, and in particular from his books *The Future in Education* (1941) and *Education for a World Adrift* (1943). He argued that in a ‘world adrift’, with ‘no standards, no principle to rule and discipline it’ (1943, 9), strengthening training in ‘character’ was essential. Ensuring a ‘habitual vision of greatness’ was central to this (Livingstone 1943, 33):
The sight of goodness in life or in literature or history gives a standard and a challenge. If anyone has been able to compare the first-rate with the second-rate, his criticism will not be merely bitter and barren, but creative, born of a vision perceiving the good, dominated by it and desiring to bring it to birth. (Livingstone 1943, 36)

Along with arguing for the development of ‘character’ he advocated the creation of good citizens. Citizens, he argued, with strong and explicit debts to Aristotle, were ‘made, not born’. The ‘most important element in training for citizenship’ came informally, through practice and life rather than study: ‘we become good citizens by doing what good citizens do’. (Livingstone 1943, 99) Religion and institutional traditions such as parliamentary government were ‘schools’ which provided a ‘general social education’, but other institutions gave this ‘a specific form, institutions whose members learn the habit of citizenship by being citizens’.

One great school of citizenship in England is the Trade Union, where several millions of Englishmen learn to subordinate private wishes and opinions to a common policy, and a mass of individuals becomes a disciplined army. A strike may be inconvenient or even unjustifiable, but men who will throw up their work and livelihood for a common cause, possibly against their desire or even their judgement, have learnt one at least of the lessons of social education - how to act as a community. (Livingstone 1943, 100).

The contrast between the appropriations of the Classical world by the labour colleges and the WEA-university traditions is stark. For the former, the focus was on periods of social and political breakdown, a society challenged by internal pressures, and the inadequacy of political leadership among the dispossessed. For the latter, the emphasis was on a timeless ideal: a model to be emulated.

**History in adult education**

Historians were plentiful in early university extra-mural education, and history seems to have been one the dominant subjects in early WEA and university extra-mural education. When the Oxford extra-mural delegacy started a tutorial class in Chatham Dockyard in 1911, the subject chosen was ‘Industrial History’ (Baker 1931, 13). When, after the war, Oxford re-established two tutorial classes in Kent in 1918, both were on the ‘Social History of England’; the following year both were on nineteenth century social history. Of the 41 Oxford tutorial classes held in Kent between 1918 and 1930, 20 were historical; when the WETUC began to establish courses in South Wales in 1921/22, three of its five courses were on ‘Industrial History’ and one on ‘Social Movements in the 19th Century’ (Corfield 1969, 232-3). Similarly for the labour colleges: in Edinburgh in 1926, the SLC offered a ‘History of the European working class’, ‘Cries in History’, the ‘Evolution of Capitalism’ (and, as we have seen, ‘Early Social Development): nearly half its programme was historical. And although in time the adult education curriculum shifted, history remained important: taking one year at the start of the final decade of Responsible Body funding, for instance (1981/82), 26.5 per cent of the University of Kent’s class programme, and 13.8 per cent of the WEA’s national programme, was in History.

What are we to make of this? The contribution of Tawney, Cole (and other adult educators) to the early development of economic, social and labour history is well
known. Given the titles of classes, it is hard to argue that the workers’ education movement did not have an impact on the early development of social history – though in general, we have to make a lot of a little, chiefly circumstantial, evidence. For instance, we know that ‘extensive use’ was made of Mark Hovell’s pioneering work on *The Chartist Movement* (1918) in WEA classes; Hovell ‘did good service’ for the WEA; he was killed in 1916; it seems highly likely that his understanding of Chartism was coloured by his adult education work. Bland, Brown and Tawney (compilers of *English Economic History: Select Documents* (1914)) were all Oxford extra-mural tutors. More intimate evidence is provided by Tawney’s *Commonplace Book* (1912-1914) (Winter & Joslin 1972) in which worker students’ influence on his thinking is clear. Given Cole’s lifelong engagement with WEA classes, it is difficult see how his inter-war work on social and working class history can fail to have been influenced by them. In short, there seems to be a strong case for asserting that the development of the disciplines of social and economic history in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century was profoundly influenced by adult and workers’ education.

After the Second World War, the influence of adult education on social history is perhaps better known – though still, largely in outline. In the 1950s and into the 1960s, we can point to E.P. Thompson who acknowledged, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, how he had ‘learned a great deal from members of my tutorial classes, with whom I have discussed many of the themes treated here’ (1963, p. 14). Readers of J.F.C. Harrison will recognise a continuing intellectual thread from his work on the history of adult education to his later work on milleniarist social movements (cf Harrison 1961, 1979). The central role of adult educators in labour history is well-established (cf McIlroy 2010). However, there are other stories to tell. Subject analysis of the WEA’s south eastern district shows that history increased as a proportion of total provision during the late 1940s and early 1950s; over the remainder of the decade it declined slightly. But it is also apparent that general historical courses (including social, political and economic history) were on a downward trend, while local history and archaeology were becoming more popular. (Family history was a later, and still stronger, straw in this particular wind.)

**Discussion**

This has been an exploratory paper, turning over neglected ground rather than digging deep. Its central point is that while universities’ impact on outside movements can be profound, the influence is far from unidirectional. Conclusions can only be tentative and provisional; they are offered as pointers to debate and further research:

- Classics had a profound impact on the formation of twentieth century adult and workers’ education. This was experienced particularly within the WEA and university extra-mural tradition. This influence was rekindled during and immediately after the Second World War. However, the influence was more at the level of policy than curriculum.
- The ideals which influenced the WEA and extra-mural tradition were, broadly speaking, those associated with the Hellenism of Zimmern and Livingstone – or, with a broader group of whom Gilbert Murray was arguably the intellectual leader.
- After the Second World War, Classical influence appears to have declined (though adult education had a growing impact in archaeological fieldwork).
Arguably, after 1945 History replaced the ideological role which Classics had played in adult education, though its associations tended to foreground class-based interpretations of the English past (cf Harrison 1961, Thompson 1963) rather than timeless ideals.

Late twentieth century social, economic and labour history would have been profoundly different – if, indeed, they had existed at all – without their adult educational roots.

References
De Leon D (1915) Two pages from Roman history, New York, Socialist Labor Party (first published 1903)
Holford J (1994) Union education in Britain, Nottingham, Nottingham University
Livingstone R (1943) Education for a world adrift, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
Mansbridge A (1940) The trodden road: experience, inspiration and belief, London, Dent
Millar J (nd [1979]) The labour college movement, London, NCLC Publishing Society Ltd.
Mooney T (1979) J M MacTavish, general secretary of the WEA 1916-1927: the man and his ideas, Liverpool, WEA Liverpool Branch
Peers R (1926) Adult education in the East Midlands 1920-1926, Nottingham, Department of Adult Education, University College, Nottingham
Wishart

This document was added to the Education-line collection on 29 June 2010