A contrasting world: adult education and lifelong learning, history and life history in the study of adult learning

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Introduction: provision and research
This paper addresses particular issues in the past and present of adult education and lifelong learning as well as of associated research. Its reference point is the United Kingdom although some developments have parallels elsewhere, as in the emergence of lifelong learning, associated, if not exclusively, with neo-liberalism and a discursive shift from the right to education to individuals being held responsible for their learning, primarily for vocational ends. The paper sketches what may be a central paradox, in comparing the beginning of the 1970s, and now. Then the concern was to build a firm intellectual base for studying adult education, grounded in social science as well as history, to mirror what was seen to be a still vibrant provision, with universities in a lead role (Zucas, 2009). The latter has dissipated, at least in the United Kingdom, while research, paradoxically, can be said to be stronger, if very different, in certain regards, in its epistemological and methodological base. Moreover, some contemporary scholarship might surprise key players in the early 1970s, not least the attention given to life history and in the scepticism towards objectivist social science.

Forty years is, of course, a significant time in biographies, including the collective biography of a research ‘community’ or of adult learning. In chronicling the shift from adult education to lifelong learning, it could include the decline, if not final eclipse, of university liberal adult education. In 1970, the ‘great tradition’ represented a powerful presence in a triple alliance (which, in the United Kingdom, also included the Workers Educational Association alongside local authorities) (Kelly, 1992). By 2010, the long predicted ‘death’ of university liberal adult education seems to have arrived, a final nail in the coffin being the so-called equivalent level qualification. Any learner possessing a first degree will have to pay full, that is a very high fee to study at an equivalent level. Most university extramural departments have closed or are closing (Field, 2001; Jones, 2009; Stanistreet, 2009; Schuller and Watson, 2009). The spirit and form of 2010 seems very different as universities relinquish involvement in lifelong learning and much community-orientated activity (Schuller and Watson, 2009). This is a contrasting world in other ways: Li, Savage and Pickles (2002), for example, note a marked decline in working class membership of and participation in the classical institutions of the working class.

However, ‘lifelong learning’ has expanded (albeit class remains a vital indicator of participation) (Schuller and Watson, 2009). John Field (2006) has chronicled more opportunities for learners than ever before, especially if we take into account the
private sector and the mushrooming of study tours, fitness centres, residential short courses, sports clubs, as well as vocational learning. But the ‘crisis’ of publicly provided liberal, social purpose education and the retreat of the universities in the UK is profound.

Yet research into adult and lifelong learning has strengthened but its focus, epistemological and methodological base is different: encompassing studies of informal, non-formal as well as formal learning in diverse settings. In the 1970s a small (in the wider scheme of things) yet vibrant body of research developed, devoted to popular education, including historical studies examining adult education’s social and cultural significance. Tom Kelly, the first editor of Studies in Adult Education (as it was then called), sought, as noted, to strengthen this new research by grounding it firmly in the university. He looked to disciplines like history, sociology and other social sciences to achieve this (Zucas, 2009). Kelly was also a distinguished historian of adult education, his work spanning the influence of the church in medieval England through to new forms of second chance education (Kelly 1970). By 2001, there had been a shift from such history towards, for example, life history and biography with feminism and oral history prime influences (Armstrong, 1998; Merrill and West, 2009). The movement reflected changes in the academy itself, and movement, (although heavily resisted), from modernist to a more postmodern sensibilities; from faith in objectivist science to more subjectivist and diverse understandings of learning and learners. The change, of course, was not uniform, linear or unresolved, and the rise of evidence-based research represented a renewed positivism in the educational mainstream (Hammersley, 2007). And there was fierce opposition from some older historians to life history as ‘fine, meaningless, detail’ (Fieldhouse, 1996a).

Researching provision: an older tradition
In fact, I began my academic career as a historian, focusing on a central topic, then, in adult education research: the contribution, or otherwise, of university liberal adult education – including the tutorial class movement in England (an alliance between the WEA and universities) – to stultifying working class radicalism through a process of incorporation, as in the work of Roger Fieldhouse (Fieldhouse, 1996b). This was challenged by historians, including, later, Lawrence Goldman (1995), who asked for the evidence that the working class would, in other circumstances, have been drawn to more militant politics? The ‘voices’ of worker-students themselves were, however, often muted in the debate.

My own research in the early 1970s examined the contribution of Tawney and the tutorial classes to the working class movement, questioning how educationally radical the tutorial classes actually were or how grounded in working class life. What the research lacked, I came to realise, was any fulsome engagement, using oral history methods, for instance, with learners themselves (West, 1972). Interestingly, too, the concern driving some of the work was born of a desire to reinvigorate working class adult education. The old dynamics had dissipated and, according to some of us, needed to be re-energised, given continuing class inequalities (West, 1972; Lovett, 1975). The 1970s, in these terms, was a harbinger of the future, in that the older world of working class adult education was in decline (Goldman, 1995). And the values of co-operation and Christian Socialism that infused that world
The 1970s

In fact, the 1970s, in retrospect, represented a significant moment in the marginalisation of a certain kind of adult education. The Russell Report, published in 1973, had been largely ignored. It was set up to review non-vocational adult education in England and Wales and was meant to consider how to establish the most effective and economical deployment of available resources for a national system of education, ‘continuing throughout life’. However, it failed to ask radical questions of the structure of the whole educational ‘family’ and the distribution of resources between the generations. Moreover, the UK Treasury vetoed any large-scale investment in adult education arguing that more than enough had been given to the Open University and money was needed elsewhere. It is now clear that the Treasury felt the money committed to the Open University had to be at the expense of the hoped-for expansion of general adult education. In 1972-3, the total budget for the Open University was £7.9 million while there was only £4.5 million for all the other DES-funded Responsible Bodies for Adult Education put together (Goldman, 1995). This was also the period of oil crisis, of public expenditure reductions and of the beginning of the relentless tendency to reduce education’s purpose to employability, ‘turning the public issue of the dearth of good jobs into the private trouble of constant retraining’ (Coffield, 2007).

Research: enter oral history and feminism

Tom Kelly wanted, as noted, to ground the study of adult education in conventional university disciplines: but learners themselves, as agents, especially women, could get lost, which oral history and feminism, in particular, sought to challenge. In fact, from the 1960s onwards, ways of knowing were contested and challenged in various parts of the academy, which found expression in research on adult and lifelong learning. ‘His-story’ and constructions of the big education picture were challenged in the emergence of, among other things, feminist biographical and oral history research.

Oral history was being used by historians to tell the history of ordinary people and to explore what life was like for them, on their own terms. Paul Thompson stressed this point, arguing that ‘the challenge of oral history lies partly in relation to this essential social purpose of history’ (2000: 3):

Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account. In so doing, oral history has radical implication for the social message of history as a whole (Thompson, 2000:6).

Oral history claimed an egalitarian purpose in that it could bring to life people’s social worlds (including learning lives) in ways which much documentary evidence rarely did (Thompson, 2000). The oral history interview was conceived as an interaction and dialogue: generating a shared authority, lending to it a particular legitimacy and a wider social purpose. Portelli (2006), however, noted the resistance to oral history in the academy: once the ‘floodgates of orality are opened, writing (and rationality
along with it) will be swept out as if by a spontaneous uncontrollable mass of fluid, amorphous material’ (p.33); which echoed the ‘fine meaningless, detail’ critique within adult education research. Portelli took on the ‘traditional writers of history’ and the ‘omniscient narrator’. ‘They appear to be impartial and detached…oral history changes the writing of history…the narrator is pulled into the narrative…the telling of the story is part of the story being told’ (Portelli, 2006: 41). This pointed towards auto/biography in feminist research and in the study of adult education.

Second wave feminism was also proving influential in the study of adult learning: in North America, the United Kingdom but also in the Francophone world (see Ollagnier, 2007). Feminism looked back to the Chicago School but also to the recent work of C Wright Mills (1959/1970). It was concerned with the pervasive influence of gender in people’s lives, positioning and constructing subjects in particular ways, and how this tended to marginalize the lived experiences of women. Feminism and feminist research methods were concerned to give voice to women previously hidden in the study of adult education. Social science departments in universities were dominated by male academics and the research topics reflected this in the choice of male factory workers, youth cultures and boys as well as males in education (Merrill and West, 2009).

The idea of the personal being political and that personal experience underlies behaviours and action, was taken up by a number of women researchers of adult learning. They emphasised a participatory ethos, which was to characterise the use of biographical research in adult learning (Armstrong, 1998). Much European work initially focused on women’s experience - especially working class women - of studying in higher education. The research placed the subjects of enquiry as central to the research process, arguing for their voices to be taken into account in relation to policy decisions and adult education (West et al, 2007). Both Arlene McLaren (1985) and Rosalind Edwards (1993), as ex-mature students themselves, drew on their biographies and included the researcher’s self in their studies of mature women in universities. The work explored how such students juggled different life roles, with Edwards’ research focusing on the relationship between family and education. McLaren (1985) argued that women’s lives had been obscured, hidden, glossed over and distorted. She chronicled her journey towards biographical narrative research: despite using qualitative techniques, such as participant observation and interviews, much of her analysis, she wrote, remained quantitative. Women’s experiences were presented as percentages, within an overall theoretical framework that stressed development stages, critical life events, unexpected contingencies and sexual and class divisions in society. Yet something was missing, she concluded: the picture was too static and deterministic. She re-examined her case studies and brought the lived experience of women, in all its complexity, more directly into her text.

The self of the researcher, and the interaction between researchers and researched, were brought into the frame, in ways that would have astonished earlier generations of social scientists and historians. Feminists argued that researchers persistently refused to interrogate how they generate their stories. There was a presumption, as in the natural sciences, that theories and methods neutralise personal and political influences. Conventional detachment and distance were described as a fetish, a ‘God trick …that mode of seeing that pretends to offer a vision that is from everywhere and nowhere, equally and fully’ (Haraway, 1988: 208). Such tricks presented fictions of the
‘truth’ while denying the interests, privilege and power of the researcher. The term ‘auto/biography’ was coined to draw attention to the inter-relationship between the constructions of one’s own life though autobiograp
hy and the construction of the life of another through biography (Stanley, 1992). The implication is that we cannot write stories about ourselves without making reference to and hence constructing others’ lives and selves, and those constructions we make of others in writing their life histories contain and reflect our own histories, social and cultural locations as well as psychologies. A rich seam of explicitly auto/biographical work emerged, in these terms, over the last two decades, in the study of adult and lifelong learning (Miller, 2007; West, 1996; Merrill and West, 2009).

Big and small, macro and micro
The accusations about ‘fine, meaningless detail’ and a fluid and vacuous orality never entirely disappeared; neither did the concern that the big picture was being neglected, including in post-structuralist critiques of life history and narrative methods in studies of learners and more widely (Plummer, 2001). A central argument was that people might simply be unaware of the discourses that pervade their stories, ironically echoing earlier structuralist criticisms of oral history (Merrill and West, 2009). In recent work, Barbara Merrill and I revisited Edward Thomson’s work, as part of exploring this debate. Thompson (1978) – himself a distinguished adult educator and historian - argued that new experience, and the thoughts associated with it, can evoke new kinds of consciousness or forms of knowledge. People engage in thinking, he went on, mischievously – (he was addressing French structuralist Marxists like Althusser) - outside the academy: in tilling the fields, in building houses, or in engaging in adult learning. As new experience marches into lives, in the form of poverty or a family learning project, people can think, reflexively, about what may be happening. They may be encouraged to question poverty or the assumptions underlying social policy. The potentially rich and dynamic relationship between social being and consciousness, and how people can learn their world in new ways, was often lost in overly structuralist, or, it might be added, some post-structuralist perspectives.

In fact, in thinking of macro/micro level dynamics, there is a strong desire among many life history researchers of adult learning to reconnect socio-structural with psychological analysis, theories of social reproduction with understandings of personal transformation (see, West et al, 2007). Life history research appears in fact to propel some, at least, towards interdisciplinarity. Lives, and learning, are shaped by particular historical moments, by specific social forces and discourses, to which people may respond in different and diverse ways. But the response needs psychological understanding too: of why people respond differently, in apparently similar ‘objective’ situations. There has been a focus, for instance, on the role of anxiety in learning and the use of use of object relations theory to interpret how significant others, including teachers, can contain anxiety and create good enough space for important transitions (West, 2007). It is interesting that in the Chicago School, social psychologists, like Mead, and sociologists, worked closely together. It was only later, as sociology strove to be more scientific and quantitative, that they tended to go their separate ways, including in the study of adult and lifelong learning (West, 1996).
C. Wright Mills, like Thomson, serves as reference point in these processes. He urged researchers to understand the larger historical scene by reference to its meaning for the inner life (as in adult learning). A biographical focus, in Wright Mill’s writing, encourages researchers to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – learning and transitional processes are a prime example - and to consider the relations between the two (C. Wright Mills, 1959/1970). Some very recent biographical research into adult learning embodies this imperative, combining, for instance, critical theory with psychoanalysis in the study of men in training programmes and professionals within particular cultures of learning (Weber, 2007; Salling Olesen, 2007).

The ambition to straddle big and small – the historical, socio-cultural and psychological – also finds expression in a trans European study of non-traditional learners in higher education (the RANLHE project: www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl). Here an effort is made to combine socio-cultural with psychosocial understanding of learning, socialisation and change processes. The interdisciplinary frame includes Bourdieu’s ideas of habitus, disposition and capitals (including cultural, educational and social capital), as these impose themselves subjectively. But it also encompasses psychoanalytic interpretative strategies, linked to clinical perceptions and practices, which can illuminate, for instance, some of the conscious but also unconscious reasons behind individual’s investment in learning (Frosh et al, 2005; West, 1996 and 2001). This allows for ‘binocular’ accounts in which concepts and procedures from different traditions are shared. Research like this straddles macro and micro, the outer and inner world, in ways largely absent in earlier adult education research. Such work also attempts to forge a post-scientistic, more reflexive form of enquiry: one searching for detachment and distance yet mindful of the embodied, affective and relational processes at the core of learning and research. If times are hard for an older, more liberal, critical spirit in adult learning, research, at least, maybe paradoxically, can be radically vibrant, albeit, sometimes, on the margins of mainstream educational research.

References
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