Loving Learning in Adult Education: Memories of Shakespeare Street 1922-2010

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Introduction

Summer 2010 saw the closure of 14-22 Shakespeare Street, the University of Nottingham’s Adult Education Centre. Acquired by the University College between 1922 and the 1940s, Shakespeare Street comprised five houses, each with their own life histories as former Music School, Children’s Library, Temperance Hotel, Coal Survey laboratory, Church Rooms and Secretarial School. The University gradually reworked the five houses into a centre that functioned both as a teaching venue and as the administrative heart of Nottingham’s ‘extra-mural empire’ (Marriott, 1984). From the late 1960s, Shakespeare Street also housed the Nottingham headquarters of the Workers Educational Association (WEA). A location key to the careers of both Robert Peers, holder of the world’s first university chair in adult education (1922), and Harold Wiltshire, author of ‘The Great Tradition’ (1956), Shakespeare Street (or ‘Shakers’ as it was known to staff and students) provided adult education of many hues (vocational, non-vocational, day-release, certificated, parent and toddler, liberal) until 2010 by which time the University had reconfigured and relocated provision to the Jubilee Campus home of the School of Education, successor to the department of Adult Education.

This paper focuses upon the reactions of students and staff, past and present, to the closure of this historic centre for adult learning. It leaves aside the issues of government policy and institutional strategy to explore emotional responses and the extent to which these suggest that the learning experience was connected to issues of ‘well-being’ in addition to formal qualification and training (for the political and financial context see Stanistreet, 2009; Schuller and Watson, 2009). It also assesses the extent to which Shakespeare Street achieved the aims set out in 1952 of providing ‘a pleasant meeting place with a University atmosphere’ in which to deliver courses that supported ‘the advancement of knowledge and the growth of wisdom
and understanding’ (quoted from the unpublished notes of Brian Graham, former centre warden).

**Methodology**

Between May and July 2010, the School of Education organised a series of events to celebrate the contribution of Shakespeare Street to adult education, and to allow the individual voices of students and staff to be heard. We felt strongly the need to acknowledge attachment to the centre and its work as it closed. The events included lunchtime lectures, an exhibition, and a formal evening of reflections from distinguished adult educators. These allowed participants to reminisce and/or to protest at the closure. People were invited to record a memory either on a ‘Memory Board’ in one of the classrooms (postcards and pens were left in the room), or via a dedicated webpage hosted on the School of Education’s website. Memory was used as an unmediated form of oral history providing a ‘key approach to the past’ (Black 2005, 49) that could claim to be egalitarian (Thompson 2000; West 2010). There was no guidance on the form of memory beyond the question, ‘tell us what your time at Shakespeare Street meant to you’. Thirty-five memories were submitted, the majority via the physical Memory Board.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Postcards on Memory Board</th>
<th>Website Submission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signed</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub Total</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
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The memories were moderated to ensure that nothing libellous or sensitive was included (nothing was). Contributors chose to either identify themselves or remain anonymous. Only six chose anonymity. They were advised via notices (hard copy and web) that their comments might subsequently be anonymised and published (in effect they were published as soon as they had been moderated as they were readily available for others to read).

Staff-student ratios and the demographics of the thirty-five respondents were not considered significant for this study. The priority was to acknowledge and value...
emotional attachment to the centre, not to nuance this by age, gender, period/subject of study or stakeholder category.

**Analysis**

The initial analysis of the memories revealed an overwhelming focus upon two broad themes: relationships and personal development. Shakespeare Street was remembered as fostering positive relationships: staff with students, students with students, staff and students with the centre (Balatti and Falk, 2002: 282-3; 290-1). It was described as contributing to individual and communal well-being in the form of friendships, confidence, participation, sense of belonging, access to knowledge, opportunity and general quality of life:

The Shakespeare Street Adult Education Centre is where I realised my passion for learning; it gave me the opportunity to move on to doing two degrees.

Thanks to my tutors, I have thoroughly enjoyed the work and revelled in the acquired knowledge; something that I now have enough confidence in to pass on to others.

I walked through the door at Shakespeare Street in September 2004 to do a Certificate in Counselling. This was a huge step for me to take at 36 but it has been the best thing I ever did.

Similar studies, for example of the impact of the WEA, reinforce the role of adult education in building relationships as well as knowledge:

For me the WEA has been a way of life since the 1940s. So much more than a network of classes, the WEA is the source of some of my deepest friendships. The voices of countless tutors and fellow-students made some sense out of the confused babble of ideas that was all I carried away from a wartime education’ (Roberts, 2003: 310).

Shakespeare Street was described by two participants as contributing to psychological well-being:
The courses at Shakespeare Street probably helped to preserve my sanity while I struggled to care for my aunt through the miseries of Alzheimer’s.

The short courses not only gave people invaluable learning opportunities but also improved their social and mental well-being.

The doors of the building were used as metaphor in several memories that expressed a sense of the centre as a person or character. These included two poems:

Shakespeare’s going to sleep – perchance to dream
Creative stuff will move a newer way
These doors will soon be locked – it seems the emptiness has moved in here to stay.
It’s the windows, the brick, the soft stone and the name
The dark green door in its understanding frame.

One tutor expressed the feeling of acceptance that came with teaching in Shakespeare Street as opposed to one of the department’s regional centres:

Notice that I didn’t teach at Shakespeare Street initially; that was because I had to serve my ‘apprenticeship’ in the region. I think it took me two years to be invited to take a class in Shakers itself.

Deeper analysis used two frameworks from heritage education focusing upon the impact of past events or places upon constructions of identity. This seemed appropriate for a project reflecting upon a lengthy history, in this case of adult education. David Lowenthal uses the idea of ‘validating comforts’ to theorise the role of the past in the creation of personal and community identity (1985: 44). His interest is in emotional rather than intellectual responses that articulate with a social capital perspective on the development of self and community:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lowenthal’s ‘validating comforts’</th>
<th>Shakespeare Street memories</th>
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Familiarity
Landmark building within the cityscape; recognised as a ‘seat of learning’

Identity
Learning as becoming, contribution to identity-formation, sense of self

Guidance
Connection to learning; source of wisdom

Enrichment
Social environment for learning – learning as pleasure, learning for leisure, learning for life, learning for personal development

Escapism
Source of calm and comfort in the midst of the city centre – a place to escape *to* rather than *from*

The second framework was developed for the National Trust in 2004 by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) and Atkins Heritage. Its purpose was to provide the Trust with an objective tool to assess the cultural value of the historic environment (IFA/Atkins Report 2004). The Trust wanted to measure the extent to which the historic environment benefitted society not just economically, but in terms of community well-being and citizenship (Speight 2008: 272).

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>IFA/Atkins Indicators</strong></th>
<th><strong>Shakespeare Street memories</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Visible historic environments</td>
<td>Recognition of the building as Grade II Listed; mention of architectural features.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic environments marked in some way by residents/users</td>
<td>Knowledge of the building’s history; feeling a part of this history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics of conversation/interaction</td>
<td>Personal and group learning journeys, shared experience of the venue; attendance at closing events; contribution of memory.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development of networks</td>
<td>Membership of a learning community; friendships; support networks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved self-confidence</td>
<td>Career and personal journeys of students and staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better health or well-being</td>
<td>Reflections on contribution of the centre</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Well-being, and related ‘social outcomes’ or criteria, are currently gaining ground in both education and public policy. For example, the independent ‘think and do tank’, the New Economics Foundation has produced a series of reports on ‘well-being’ as an alternative measurement of national prosperity to GDP (http://www.neweconomics.org/programmes/well-being). The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council uses an ‘improvement framework’ of generic social outcomes to quantify the impact of learning upon society (www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/toolstemplates/genericsocial/index.html). Their first tier indicators include ‘Stronger and safer communities’, ‘Health and well-being’ and ‘Strengthening Public life’. These break down into second tier indicators including ‘supporting cultural diversity and identity’, ‘building the capacity of community and voluntary groups’ and ‘contributing to mental and physical well-being’. Such frameworks mark an evolution of Lowenthal’s ideas from the 1980s and demonstrate increasing recognition of alternative methods of valuation, although these may not filter through to government funding decisions.

The analysis of the Shakespeare Street memories using Lowenthal’s ‘validating comforts’ and the National Trust framework produced three strands:

1. Sense of **history** in the learning venue (and the ways in which this was expressed): familiarity, identity, guidance; visible historic building.

2. Sense of shared memories (and their contribution towards learning **atmosphere**): enrichment, escapism; networks, well-being.

3. Sense of shared **adversity** (for example in coping with the idiosyncrasies of the building): identity, topics of conversation/interaction.

Contributors spoke of the **history** of the building; they were conscious and proud of its heritage and saw themselves as part of this (hence the willingness to identify themselves in the memories?). One noted it was ‘nice to study in a building that was the original home of Nottingham University and once employed Hugh Gaitskell’. Another commented on the stone lion above the door in one of the classrooms:
‘That’s when I fell in love with this building. I’m sorry to leave’. Several spoke of the presence of history and memories: ‘This place is full of happy memories’; ‘it was a great place to learn – full of history and memories’.

The Library attracted attention for its old-fashioned charm, described as ‘an Aladdin’s Cave of ideas to ‘rootle’ in (before it was all catalogued)’. Another recalled its role as a distribution centre: ‘Library – before Health and Safety. Piles of books on the floor, tall wobbly ladders, wooden book boxes with splinters. Supplying out-centres with boxes – about 130 at a time and book cupboards in every classroom’. One student mentioned voluntary work cataloguing the centre archives: ‘We slaved away in the heat and murk of the basement amongst the vast quantities of sometimes-mouldering documents’.

Many spoke of the atmosphere created by staff and students: ‘A social centre, a place where learning felt holistic and inspirational, and where I made lifelong friends’; ‘all the tutors, staff and students were friendly and lively. Everyone was willing to work, share knowledge and personal experiences’; ‘anybody who has had connections with ‘Shakers’ will remember the remarkable tutors, the great camaraderie and the sheer joy of learning there’; ‘the students gave the centre a buzz and a warmth generated from their enthusiasms and commitment to self development’; ‘the atmosphere in the centre was always warm and despite the growth of the department over the years, Shakespeare Street never lost its welcoming attitude’. The cafeteria was noted as a site of informal learning: ‘There was a shift system for coffee breaks and we had to stick to it otherwise the discussions could go on for hours’. It was an atmosphere conducive to lasting relationships: ‘I went on a WEA holiday from here in 1960. I met my husband on it’.

The limitations of study in a Grade II Listed building made up of five houses with different floor levels in a noisy city centre created shared experience rather than problem. Adversity was relished rather than bemoaned:

Having a Centre right opposite the City Police Station had its moments. Of course we felt safe being so close to the seat of the law but there were occasions when the peace of the building was shattered as police cars disappeared at high speed, sirens wailing – but not so often as the Fire Station emptied, that too being right opposite us.
The office I had at the rear of the top floor of the building – the floor sloped towards one corner and sitting on a wheeled chair working at my computer I would gradually get further away from the desk!

Room 13 in the basement of Peachey Street [the Annexe, acquired in 1968] feels like a dungeon and the crèche is in the room overhead. Crashes and bangs and the pitter patter of running feet.

Another advantage of the position of our offices was that the fire escape door led out onto a bit of flat roof between the eaves. It was quite a sun trap – so we grew tomatoes up there in Grow Bags, not many people knew that!

Of the thirty-five memories submitted, only one could be described as ‘negative’. For this contributor, the impact of government policy and institutional strategy (leading to changing provision and the move to academic assessment), overshadowed the positive aspects of their connection:

- It is a sad reflection on the current state of Adult Education in the city – it is ironic that this very centre back in 1920 was the venue for the first Adult Education centre in the country.

**Conclusions**

The memories submitted are of students and staff who loved the centre, and believed that it enriched their lives. We lack testimony from those who felt excluded.

The extent to which Shakespeare Street and other university adult education centres truly widened participation and provided access for all throughout the various stages of their lives is a larger and different piece of research (see Speight, 2002; 2003; 2004 for historical assessments of the department’s work).

The memory collection was a way of recording personal attachment to Shakespeare Street as that attachment was broken by closure. It records what the contributors chose to record and on their own terms. It did not seek to explore levels of participation but rather to allow voices to be heard and valued with minimum input from the researcher, herself a part of the Shakespeare Street story. The analysis supports the view that ‘Shakers’ made a valuable contribution to individual and collective well-being during its life as a centre for adult education. It supports Merrill and West’s contention that ‘learning is a subjective process, related to immediate experience, embedded in relationships, as well as dealing with cultural bodies of knowledge or scripts for interpreting experience’ (2006, 297). The experience was
one of learning in a ‘pleasant meeting place’ and growing ‘wisdom and understanding’ as Brian Graham and his colleagues intended back in 1952. The memories captured what mattered to participants: feelings of belonging and of socialisation into a community of practice sharing learning in a non-threatening environment. Contributors described a ‘process of becoming’ as they grew in confidence and knowledge (Macleod et al, 2006: 511). They expressed deep affection for the physical building, although it was the learning atmosphere that mattered far more than the spaces, lighting or acoustics. This concurs with Normie’s findings in his discussion of adult education accommodation in England and Germany: ‘even those who appreciated these prestigious buildings [the German Volkshochschulen] realised that there were more important things for the creation of the right atmosphere than just the physical aspects of provision’ (1999). He speculates on what makes a successful learning environment:

an important factor in being able to learn successfully is that the student should not feel intimidated by their surroundings. This is why old converted buildings are sometimes preferred because they are deemed to have a good welcoming ‘atmosphere’.

One of his interviewees from the 1970s described the ‘village feeling’ of her learning centre, implying a sense of belonging and of community where people knew each other and communicated with each other. This reinforces the importance of those communal and informal learning spaces where discussions could flourish beyond the formal classroom. It also suggests that modern teaching space can be counter-productive in its impact upon learning.

History, atmosphere and shared adversity emerged from the contributed memories of Shakespeare Street as ‘validating comforts’ reinforcing the significant impact that the centre had upon its users. Students wrote of their learning journeys, of the change or growth of their learner identities, and their recognition of life-wide learning (Barnett 2010). Participants made connections between their studies and their personal well-being (Merrill and West, 2006; West, 2010). Overall they had a non-instrumental approach, recording their personal and social development rather than their qualification outcomes. In this they stand in opposition to the UK government’s preoccupation with students as ‘consumers’ and reinforce notions instead of students as members of communities of practice (Streeting and Wise, 2009), as society participants (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010) and as reflective and critical
practitioners. Such themes are of course as pertinent to higher education in general as they are to adult education.

**Postscript: A poem for Shakespeare Street**

It's about recollections  
Of people and relationships  
Conversation and debate  
Remarkable sounds and sights

It's about sirens  
Blaring from roaring engines  
Speeding from the station opposite  
Of workmen digging holes in the street

It's about artists filling those  
With ideas and paint and words  
Hanging the holes on Georgian walls  
Displaying how they've been filled

It's colours, perfect perspective, perfect symmetry  
One of the shades of green, a shape seen in a dream  
It's the windows, the brick, the soft stone and the name  
The dark green door in its understanding frame.

It's a seat of teaching, achievement, and meeting of minds  
Where page and image can be shared by appreciative eyes  
The friendly librarian with the hair and unforgettable face  
In my life for four years, it’s no wonder I love the place.

**Bibliography**

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