The Road to Hell....

Two years ago I was in Edinburgh for the Make Poverty History protest at the G8 summit in July. The grey haired woman on the bus from the National Pensioners' Convention was carrying a peace flag and wearing a Greenpeace t-shirt. Her rucksack was scattered with badges supporting the Anti-War Coalition and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Around her arm she wore white and red wristbands wanting to make capitalism, as well as, poverty history[1]. She was bending the ear of the young man sitting next to her: 'Why do politicians suddenly become stupid once they get elected? It always happens. This lot are the worst. Forget about making a ring around the city, I'd put a ring around their necks!'

You could see him trying to escape her onslaught, until she finally pushed the right button. ' How many hours a week do you work?' ' I can't get a job', the young man said. 'I come from Sudan. I want to work here but your government wants to send me home'. This was a public service bus, taking tourists to the Royal Mile and locals into town. Not one of the hundreds of charter buses carrying thousands of protesters from every corner of Britain to Edinburgh for the biggest demonstration in Scotland's history. The asylum seeker from Sudan got off the bus with the grey haired woman and they joined the march together.

You could tell that incidents and episodes like this were taking shape all over the place. The thing about a mass demonstration, with an urgent and progressive design, is that it is bigger than the self-interests of the individuals involved. It brings together lots of people from different walks of life, emboldened by the occasion and inspired by their mutual commitment, in the celebration of common purpose. For every one that actually joined the march in Edinburgh, there were a dozen others from their various supporters groups and networks back home, cheering them on.

Planning for the demonstration had begun six months earlier by the North South coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social movements, community

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[1] Make Poverty History is one of the larger campaigns associated with the Global Call to Action Against Poverty. Its symbol is a white wristband. Make Capitalism History is a campaigning slogan of the Scottish Socialist Party. Its symbol is a red wristband.

based organisations (CBOs), charities, churches, pressure groups and social justice campaigns that make up the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP). Similar public demonstrations were taking place across Britain and the wider world as G8 leaders made their way to Gleneagles in Scotland for a meeting in which world poverty and climate change were, for the first time, top of the agenda. In seventy-two countries, from Korea to Kenya and Australia to Peru, people dressed in white gathered in the streets, wearing white wristbands and demanding the elimination of extreme poverty. (Naidoo 2005)

By the time the G8 leaders met together in Edinburgh, 10 million Britons had signed up to the Make Poverty History Campaign. One sixth of the British population knew that during the four days of deliberations in Scotland, 120,000 children in Africa alone would die because of poverty. Television companies had cleared their schedules to report in detail what would transpire. An entertaining, and not unproblematic, alliance between political activists and celebrities lent their energy and glamour to the occasion. Some gave the mistaken impression that the whole thing was invented and made possible because of the insistence and persistence of Bob Geldof.

But the sheer breadth and energy of this kind of engagement was already well established before the media made it fashionable. According to the World Development Movement, European and North American protests and pop concerts 'were only one element of a much larger movement rooted in developing countries – showing that the fiercest critics of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank policies were the people most affected by them'. (Mayo 2005) Reflecting on its millennium campaign to cancel third world debt, Jubilee 2000 argued that 'the world will never be the same again' as a result of huge numbers of people from civil society movements in both North and South mobilising to challenge the negative effects of globalisation, through citizen action, in solidarity beyond the nation state, to transform global agendas (Jubilee 2000 Coalition) Through the activities of NGOs, CBOs, social movements, issue campaigns and policy advocacy, citizens have been increasingly finding ways to make their voices heard and to influence the decisions and practices of larger institutions that affect their lives – both locally and globally. (Thompson 2005)

In the event, one of the most effective mobilisations of recent times, rooted in the struggles of those with least power and security in the world community, was denied its moment of absolute attention on the world stage. The detonating of four terrorist bombs in London, timed to coincide with the opening of the Summit at Gleneagles, shifted attention dramatically to a rather different kind of protest, which was equally well planned. As we should know, actions that spring from civil society associations and from 'the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of the family, faith, interests and ideology' do not necessarily lead to similar conclusions. (Waltzer 1992)

But even without the bombings, it was never likely that the G8 leaders would fulfil the hopes and commitments demanded by GCAP. Despite all the populist hype in the media - about the one room and the eight men with the capacity to make history – activists knew that the real decisions were being made elsewhere. They knew that some – but not much - debt would be cancelled. They knew that an announcement was to be made that would exaggerate an increase in aid. They knew there was to be some warm words about the importance of education and the fight against HIV/AIDs and malaria. Without the mass mobilisation, there would have been none of this. It is unlikely that poverty and climate change would have even been on the agenda.

But activists also knew that nothing deriving from the deliberations in Gleneagles would stem the lucrative flow of arms from the G8 to Africa and beyond. That no-one would do anything to save the three and a half million people currently starving in Niger. That no-one wanted to take a stand over Darfur. That discussions about trade tariffs would be shelved until the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in December. That the decision to stand shoulder to shoulder with George Bush would require those holding more enlightened views on climate change to remain silent. And that when everyone went home, the back-tracking would begin. Those involved in GCAP were already planning what to do next to keep up the pressure.

Because of the London bombings, however, attention shifted back to the war on terror. The G8 leaders were able to slip away without much adverse comment on how little they had conceded to the poor or to the planet. George Bush was able to return to the rhetoric of 'freedom and democracy' ranged against 'evil doers' and Tony Blair's

opinion poll ratings recovered considerably from their all-time low less than two months previously.

Meanwhile, back at the office, a discussion was taking place on email about the newly proposed Foundation Learning Tier.

'Current developments are taking forward the Foundation learning Tier (FLT) which will bring cohesion and clarity to all provision that sits below level 2'
'Is this a neologism or have I just been asleep/on holiday/not paying attention?'
'Developments in what?'
'Why is sub-level 2 provision sitting rather than supporting or uplifting, for example?'
'Wakey wakey! The 'Tier' describes a programme, not a qualification… and there will be elements that are non-accredited as well as things that do lead to awards within the new Framework for Achievement'
'From a mandarinate perspective (sic)…
'The FLT reproduces many of the design features of the proposed new Diplomas and on the way it will subsume current E2E provision thus becoming a stepping stone to both new Diplomas and Apprenticeships or to GCSEs in due course…'
'The FLT has moved from a tentative description, through ministerial blessing, to become part of the furniture of the sector…'
'I hadn't realised that it had already become part of the furniture'
'Can one spend one's learning life in the Tier?'
'Will there be enough to keep one interested, stimulated, motivated?'

Good question. I was already wondering about the furniture on the Titanic and fiddling whilst Rome burns as I struggled to make any sense of this all too familiar exchange. At a time when a quarter of a million ordinary members of civil society in Britain marched around Edinburgh to put an end to world poverty, and whilst the repercussions of the war on terror were threatening to destroy the uneasy settlement that is British multiculturalism, the dominant discourse in adult learning – as reflected in this discussion – appeared completely *dis*engaged from any sense of its own irrelevance.

Globaloney[2]

Since the 1990s the term globalisation has increasingly been used to describe the latest, and most advanced, development of international capitalism, made possible by the spread of new technologies. It is defined by War on Want as 'the way that world trade, culture and technologies have become rapidly integrated over the last twenty years, as geographic distance and cultural difference no longer pose an obstacle to trade. New technologies have increased the ease of global communication, allowing money to change hands in the blink of an eye'. (War on Want)

It has become the organising framework within which considerable wealth is created and trade is facilitated. The national economies of the rich world and the poor world are now inter-connected as never before. We live in a globalising world characterised by increasing mutual interdependence but increasing polarisation between rich and poor within and between nations and regions. According to Zygmunt Bauman, when the world's poor are asked what aspects of their existence are most demeaning and painful, two themes 'crop up with amazing regularity – insecurity and powerlessness'. (Bauman 2001)

Globalisation is also the organising framework within which current ideas and beliefs about adult learning are given value and priority by politicians. At an earlier meeting of G8 leaders in 1999 those present issued a Charter of Aims and Ambitions for Lifelong Learning. (Cologne Charter 1999)

The text faithfully reflected the emerging orthodoxy about skills and jobs that was already taking shape across Europe and North America, whilst laying bare the various common sense assumptions and apparently reasonable preoccupations – concerned with civic responsibility and social cohesion - that also enabled an all- to- easy political and professional consensus to be achieved.

In the words of the Cologne Charter, the challenge facing every country was

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[2] Some argue that globalisation is an ideological term that represents the victory of neo-liberal capitalism at the expense of state socialism and communism. It is seen by those who take this view as both inevitable and beneficial for humankind. Those who start from a more critical perspective and prefer to focus on resistance to neo-liberalism and the transformation of social relationships in the interests of greater equality, refer to the former position as globaloney.

how to become a learning society and to ensure its citizens are equipped with the knowledge, skills and qualifications they will need for the twenty first century. Economies and societies are increasingly knowledge based. Education and skills are indispensable to achieving economic success, civic responsibility and social cohesion. (Cologne Charter op cit)

The thinking reflected a strategic vision in which governments increasingly looked to business and the private sector to help shape appropriate educational policy and provision. The notion of a learning society was one in which individuals were to be encouraged, persuaded and cajoled into taking part in learning, in order to enhance their human, cultural and social capital, as the route to future employability, economic growth, mobility and cohesion. Whilst governments must therefore expect to expand their investment in education and training – especially in response to the needs of business and the economy – it was the responsibility of individuals to develop 'their own abilities and careers' on the basis of 'self generated learning' and by means of 'modern and effective ICT networks' and 'distance learning'.

The Charter concentrated on the 'entrepreneurial role' of education to ensure 'ready opportunities' for adult 're-skilling throughout life' as a 'passport to mobility', 'increased flexibility' and the changes taking place 'in the modern economy'. It recommended the 'continued development and improvement of internationally recognised tests to benchmark achievement… to establish clear targets in terms of higher standards and levels of achievement…and to enhance mobility in a globalised world'. Increasingly the role of adult education, now more usually described as lifelong learning, became that of preparing flexible workers for risk and uncertainty. Competitive advantage in the global economy apparently required skills and training rather than curiosity, creativity and critical thinking.

None of which made any recognition of earlier debates that had shaped competing ideas and beliefs about the proper purpose of adult education in a changing society: radical ideas and beliefs that were concerned to reach beyond government and business interests to articulate urgent problems and pressing concerns with people *other* than professional politicians, employers and educational providers.

The legacy of Cologne, and the policy developments that flowed from it, means that, as broadly based adult education services are being dismantled and liberal adult and community education programmes are being cut, the concentration on skills is now the preferred way of ensuring that the behaviour of individuals is in tune with the brave new world of entrepreneurial consumerism. It means the onus is very firmly on individuals to take personal responsibility for their own self improvement, in economic and social circumstances over which they have very little control.

It's a focus that makes no mention of persistent inequalities. In Britain, whilst government figures reveal only limited success of piecemeal initiatives concerned to create greater equality of opportunity, less poverty and more social justice, rhetorical conviction still attaches to schemes that are designed to counter social exclusion via personal growth and social development. A report produced by the Downing Street Strategy Unit in 2004 confirms that during the past twenty years, the incomes of better-off Britons have risen faster than those of other groups, the poorest fifth pay more of their income in taxes than the richest fifth, and the gap between the two has actually increased since New Labour came to power. (Aldridge 2004) A middle class child is currently 15 times more likely to stay middle class than a working class child is likely to move up into the middle class. A baby's fate is fixed at 22 months: school comes too late. Only the US among western nations has less upward social mobility than the UK. This is a challenging analysis given that other similar countries – Finland, France and Sweden, for example – are doing much better. But although the social and economic gap between those who thrive, and those who merely survive or go to the wall, is well documented, this does little to detract from the conventional wisdom that individuals must be encouraged to defy structural inequalities and constraints through their active demonstration of educational motivation and personal determination.

New Labour, new learning

The conceptual and material journey from adult education to skills has not only been a linguistic odyssey. Just as few people use the same language anymore, it is increasingly difficult to find anyone working in adult education that still actively

supports radical educational concerns. Over the last twenty years or so, civil society has lost its dedicated resource for emancipatory learning, in exchange for a professional community of practice, mandated by government, to deliver a centralised vision of planned social engineering. The dependence on funding from government departments and government agencies, in the context of government initiatives and targets, ensures that modern day managers and practitioners now routinely toe the line.

The changing nature of modern capitalism lies at the root of these changes. Just as the IMF and the World Bank force indigenous governments in the Global South to give up radical and popular education policies, intended to help those dying from starvation, in return for aid, so too, the dismantling of state welfare systems in the more affluent North, in favour of privatised and de-regulated alternatives, is forcing education providers in all countries to operate according to capitalist economic principles and as instruments of social engineering.

In Britain the skills agenda is closely associated with the economic requirements that derive from globalisation. In 1997, when New Labour took office, its vision for what was then called lifelong learning was already in preparation. *The Learning Age* promised an expansive agenda shaped by the requirements of a knowledge-based economy. (DEE 1998) Its emerging policy ideas on the domestic front promised 'Education, Education, Education', the reduction of poverty and the need for greater social cohesion in the interests of economic prosperity.

By 2001, the establishment of the Learning and Skills Council was intended to achieve a 'cultural revolution' in (English) attitudes to post- 16 education. In its remit letter dated 9th November, 2000, David Blunkett reinforced his view that, 'we must ensure that lifelong learning becomes a battering ram against exclusion as well as a motor for economic regeneration'. In 2003 the White Paper *21st Century Skills* set out the long-term goals for raising skill levels across the nation and the strategies intended to achieve these ambitions. (DES 2003)

Increasingly then – some would say, relentlessly – the notion of adult education, rooted in broader definitions of learning to do with curiosity and passion, the

development of critical intelligence, social justice and active citizenship has given way to an increasingly narrow, instrumental and utilitarian concentration on skills and knowledge for the labour market. The most recent FE White Paper (2006) serves only to consolidate this position. 'When subjected to closer inspection, much of the policy interest in lifelong learning is in fact preoccupied with the development of a more productive and efficient workforce'. (Field 2000)

However education for employment is only half the story. What happens to those who do not benefit from increasing prosperity? The Cologne Charter also addressed itself briefly to 'the needs of the disadvantaged', 'civic responsibility' and 'social cohesion' in ways that assume consensus but without any recognition of the considerable ideological and actual disagreement about the meanings of these terms and the values underpinning their realisation. As a general rule of thumb, the 'socially excluded' are always labelled collectively, but approached individually. The attention is directed to first rung, self-help and individual responsibilities, all of which underestimate the impact of structural constraints and overlook the huge disparity in resources available to different social groups – both of which affect their capacities to change their circumstances on an individual basis.

When he was Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett became convinced that 'lifelong learning (was) essential to sustaining a civilised and cohesive society, in which people (could) develop as active citizens, where creativity (would be) fostered and communities (could) be given practical support to overcome generations of disadvantage'. (Blunkett 1999) Tony Blair was keen to endorse this view. In the run up to the 2001 election he insisted that it was 'the duty' of individuals 'to make the most of the chances they get' and declared 'individual responsibility' to be 'the key to social order'. (Blair 2001) He also took the view that what individuals cannot be persuaded to do voluntarily, they must be obliged to do as a condition of benefit, employment and citizenship. Rising moral panic in recent years about 'feral youth', binge drinking, crime and migration have all attracted summary justice responses via Blair's populist right wing enthusiasm for measures that can be administered through enforced education.

The increasingly coercive tendency of government interventions are evident, for example, in the recent Skills White Paper which contains proposals to compel welfare benefit claimants to have their basic skills needs assessed and, if they are judged inadequate, to be forced into mandatory training at the risk of losing their income. In the same vein the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act has determined that anyone applying for naturalisation must be assessed in terms of their language skills, required to take part in citizenship classes and to pass a citizenship test which demonstrates their knowledge of British history, traditions, politics and social structure.

At the same time family learning becomes even more sinister with the introduction of compulsory parent education classes for those – mothers, usually – whose children are causing a nuisance or found to be playing truant. For a growing number of people - particularly those who are in paid employment (because of regulatory frameworks, statutory requirements, contract compliance and customer or client expectations) or who are unemployed (because of Benefit and New Deal requirements), or who are presumed 'at risk of social exclusion' or believed to exhibit 'anti-social behaviour' - much of what adult learning describes as 'individual and social development' and/or 'opportunity and knowledge' has become increasingly obligatory. (Field 2001)

This is a very different version of active citizenship to the one independently articulated on the streets of Edinburgh during the G8 Summit. For those working in adult education, active citizenship is one of the formerly radical terms that also used to be associated with audacious grass roots energy, participatory democracy and social change. It has now become a meaningless sound bite – like empowerment, participation, social inclusion and most recently, respect – that New Labour routinely appropriates to pretend a radical sounding approach to an otherwise authoritarian pre-occupation with micro-managing the potentially troublesome attitudes of the lower orders.

Used by government ministers it usually attaches to a populist refrain, pitched at the prejudices of middle-England, about the responsibilities of those being offered the opportunity to improve themselves by their own endeavours. It is predicated on the presumption of disorderly communities, in need of some kind of behaviour

modification to become 'more like us'. It is backed up with Antisocial Behaviour Orders, the biggest prison population in Europe and more than 3,000 new criminal offences added to the statute books since 1997, over half of which were never discussed in parliament, and which reflect an illiberal belief in heavy-handed regulation and an obsession with controlling the minutiae of everyday life. (Morris 2006) It is a context in which young Black Britons are more likely to go to jail than go to university.

Policies such as these are never used to coerce the middle classes into learning. No-one wonders whether those who live next door to me eat a healthy diet, put their children to bed at a reasonable hour, drink to excess or suffer from low self esteem. In my neighbourhood we don't have to participate in local meetings to prove that we are good citizens. We pay our taxes and expect those whose job it is to sort out the street lighting, the rubbish collections and the road repairs to get on with it.

There are two dangers in this modernising – and somewhat moralising – tendency, which seems to regard society as an aggregation of individuals, who are invariably referred to individually as solitary rather than social agents. Not only does it relegate discussions about common struggles and common interests to the dustbin of history, but it also translates aspirations for democratic renewal and critical engagement with political processes into issues of self-fulfilment, confidence building, consumer choice, employability and volunteering. (Blunkett 2001) It also appears to require participation in ways that are determined to adjust the socially excluded to the norms and values of white middle-class society – through education, re-training, volunteering, voting – in ways that rely on more than a little coercion and which tolerate few excuses from those who don't want to participate in this way. The danger here is that the blame for social exclusion and poverty is placed on apathetic or wilful non-participating individuals rather than on wider structural and societal trends and influences.

But it's a strategy that does little to win hearts and minds. The latest NIACE survey of participation in adult learning (Aldridge and Tuckett 2006) reveals that fewer people are currently engaged in learning than when the present government came to power. The latest evidence from the Learning and Skills Council shows that in 2005-6

participation in further education fell by between 10 % and 26% in every age range above nineteen. At the same time there was a decline of 10% in adult and community learning. (Tuckett 2007) However prescriptive and instrumental the learning agenda has become, we can draw some comfort from the fact that its actual grip on most peoples lived reality is minimal. In this kind of policy climate, with this kind of professional compliance, the sort of adult education that once called itself a movement, that in the words of Raymond Williams should be a resource to ordinary people for a journey of hope, has been cut off at its roots.

If you can't change the world, change yourself!

Marx was right when he insisted that the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of the ruling class. He also made it clear that the purpose of education is not simply to understand the world but to change it. In a recent poll conducted by BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time* programme, one half of those taking part thought that Karl Marx was the most important philosopher of all time. But his popularity with the chattering classes has done little to establish the significance of his insights in contemporary discussions about adult learning.

For the most part adult learning has given up on teaching an understanding of the world, let alone trying to change it. And with corporate capitalism in charge on a global scale, supported by sympathetic governments from the North, it is not so surprising – if you go along with Marx – that free market consumerism, new managerialism, militarism and competitive individualism have become the big ideas that help to keep the masses in their place. In this kind of climate, there is little official room - in the West, at any rate - for grand narratives, and every encouragement for the belief that because you can't change the world, you must strive to change yourself.

The idea that adult learning can help feckless and potentially disruptive individuals to change their ways is not new. Writing in *Adult Education for a Change* twenty five years ago, Nell Keddie pointed out that educational ' provision for the disadvantaged…conspicuously avoids any mention of social class and…is contexted…within a social pathology which separates the problems presented by

individuals from the social and political order which creates these problems'. (Keddie 1980) In the same publication, writing about disadvantage, I drew attention to the ways in which 'the language of 'personal deficit', 'affliction' and the need for 'treatment' to 'rehabilitate' the 'malfunctioning' adult into 'normal' society (ran) like a medical checklist through the literature of adult education'. (Thompson 1980b) It was a view that saturated the writing of influential pundits of the time such as Peter Clyne (Clyne 1972) and Henry Arthur Jones (Jones 1972, 1979)
and which formed the basis of their advice to the Russell Committee (Russell 1973) in what subsequently became known as 'Russell category work'.

The ideology of disadvantage served to hold large sections of the working class personally responsible for their own misfortunes by making it seem as though unemployment, poverty, poor education and slum conditions were *the consequence* of individual deficiencies, family breakdown and cultural deprivation. To sustain the ideology, victims were discovered all over the place but especially among 'the isolated' and 'apathetic' residents of vast council estates, prisoners' wives, ethnic minorities and single parents, all identified by their 'obvious inadequacy' and beloved by those involved in basic education and Russell category work.' (Thompson 1980b)

Because most adult educators – then, just as now - were liberal in their disposition, ideas about disadvantage connected to the belief that education could lead its victims towards 'spiritual fulfilment', 'personhood' and 'social integration'. (Paterson 1979) The ideas of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow lent dubious psychological credibility to notions of 'self actualisation' (Maslow 1968,1970) and 'becoming a person' (Rogers 1961). But despite the veneer of liberalism, Maslow constantly contrasted ordinary people 'who need others' with self actualising people who do not. He identified human needs hierarchically, with food and shelter at the bottom, and self-actualisation – defined as autonomy and not needing others - at the top . Self actualising people were those who could 'make up their own minds, come to their own decisions…(be) responsible for themselves and their own destinies'. They were obviously superior to those 'who have their minds made up for them' and who were 'apt to feel helpless, weak and totally determined', those who were 'the prey for predators, flabby whiners, rather than self determining persons'. (Maslow 1968)

What Maslow described as 'self actualising' Rogers called 'becoming a person'. He meant by it the capacity to achieve emotional self sufficiency and the determination to pursue one's own individually defined goals. The implication was that a process of personal change and individual effort could lead to individual liberation and fulfilment – and ultimately – the abolition of nasty things like poverty or sexual and racial oppression, because having become a person, individuals would not let themselves be anymore affected by such concerns. On one occasion he claimed that the troubles in Northern Ireland could be solved if only sufficient trained humanistic counsellors would go there and hold encounter groups on every street corner. (Grimshaw 1986) It is not only history that has called into question the naivety of such views.

It may seem surprising that ideas of this kind were so inspirational to adult educators in the 1970s. They are certainly illuminating about the intellectual and ideological climate in which stereotypical descriptions contributed to pathological definitions of disadvantage, leading to arguments in favour of behaviour modification through education, rather than wealth and educational redistribution, for example, in favour of the poor. In her excellent study of class and gender Beverley Skeggs is sceptical about what she calls the 'psy' professions, whose prominence she sees as directly related to the lack of attention given to social class over the last twenty years and to the emergence of 'an authorising narrative of personal trauma in which singular difficult experiences come to account for the whole personality' in ways that do not constitute a liberating ideology. (Skeggs 1997)

In similar vein, a recent article in *Adults Learning* by Kathryn Ecclestone revisits some familiar territory in the light of more recent trends and emerging orthodoxies. She is worried that the growing popularity of psycho-therapeutic notions such as self esteem and emotional intelligence - beloved by women's magazines, reality TV and self-help manuals – have now gone mainstream, 'leading to new professional activities in emotional management, life coaching, mentoring, counselling and interventions to build self esteem and make people feel good emotionally in the pursuit of motivation, educational achievement and social inclusion'. (Ecclestone, 2004) She is right to be concerned.

In the popular wisdom of adult education practice it is certainly the case that ideas about confidence, emotional intelligence and self-esteem are commonplace. The literature of funding applications, project reports and evaluation exercises are full of claims by policy makers and practitioners alike that interventions targeted at so-called non traditional learners and socially excluded groups give rise to increased confidence and self esteem. (Eldred 2005) I had thought that this was an essentially western phenomenon until I read recently in Sierra Leone – a small West African country emerging from eleven years of civil war with a ranking of last in the world in the Human Development Index – that 'the experience of social exclusion from decision-making bodies and processes, the lack of educational opportunities, early marriage and the demands of childbearing and rearing causes many women and young people to *suffer from low self-esteem and a lack of confidence* in their judgement' (my emphasis). (Von Kotze 2005) This must surely be the language of the writer rather than the assessment of the women and young people in question but indicates just how pervasive – even in the context of extreme poverty and genocide - this spurious discourse has become.

Back in Britain it is no coincidence that the language of self-esteem and emotional literacy resonate with broader cultural and political preoccupations. According to Ecclestone, 'there is a growing tone in policy circles that managing one's emotions, having good self- esteem and being emotionally literate…are part of the responsibilities of being a good citizen'. (Ecclestone 2004) According to Nick Emler, on the basis of his substantial review of the theoretical and empirical evidence for self-esteem, so strong is this new orthodoxy in political and educational circles, you would think 'low self-esteem is the cause of all the problems in all the world'. (Emler, 2001)

It is easy to see why educational practitioners are attracted to ideas that seem to focus on students' personal and emotional development in an apparently supportive and benign way, despite the fact that there is little agreement about what self esteem actually is and virtually no convincing evidence about its effects or whether interventions designed to 'raise it' actually work. (Ecclestone 2004, Emler 2001) As a form of professional responsibility it no doubt helps to counter the overly bureaucratic, instrumental and target driven culture that adult learning has become.

The government regards it as both the cause and effect of social exclusion and welcomes any amount of short-term interventions designed to counter the dysfunctional and negative behaviour of those who do not have enough of it. The belief that developing confidence and self- esteem can remedy a wide range of personal and social problems helps to distract attention from the structural causes of inequality, institutional and actual racism and from the widening gap between rich and poor more generally. And of course, it plays to the prejudices of a profession that is already well used to labelling and stereotyping its students.

What is to be done?

When the current state of lifelong learning gets written about by future historians you have to wonder what they will make of it all. Debates in the recent past might well have been contentious and fiercely contested but at least they involved political discussion – at all levels - about ideas and purpose. And they led to a lively mix of liberal and radical education in both formal and non-formal contexts. Whatever else, education was a resource that people in communities of interest could use to both enrich and change their lives.

These days, instead of specialist teachers and enthusiasts teaching an extensive range of subjects, to a relatively wide range of people, the day job for most of us entails enticing and cajoling the poor and other minorities into remedial activities designed to make them healthier, more socially competent and more likely to get a job. Either that or processing the blizzard of paperwork routinely required to prove that the latest short term initiative has been delivered on time, on budget, and in line with government targets. Either way, we know that large numbers of potential students are voting with their feet.

What counts as adult learning has come to rely on project workers, mentors and cheer leaders, drumming up support for the new managerialist desire for well behaved, gainfully employed and respectful people; with learning goals that are said to be good for them and good for society expressed in the language of skills and self esteem. It's a model that reduces teaching to the role of life coach and is based on the implicit presumption that if you can't change the world, better change yourself to make the

best of it. It doesn't leave much room for dissent or wondering what to do about climate change and world poverty.

What is really good for society, of course, is that despite all the dumbing down and bossing about and 'rolling out of strategies', ordinary people are increasingly making their voices heard on their own terms in other ways. The sheer breadth and energy of civil society movements, as we have seen, are a powerful and optimistic recognition of the belief in citizen action and solidarity beyond national boundaries. But the issues involved are complex and contested. As capital has gone global it has served to undermine the sovereignty of the nation state, whilst putting pressure on rich countries and poor countries alike to maximise profit and cut back on public expenditure. The same processes are at work that get called modernisation in the rich world and structural adjustment in the poor world – the costs of which, in both contexts, are more likely to be borne by those who can afford them least. Questions and legitimate grievances abound but solutions are in short supply. Social movements may pursue regressive as well as progressive goals, just as they may lead to the incorporation of dissent by the state rather than the challenging of inequality and social justice.

Lifelong learning is central to these concerns whether we like it or not. As employees of the state, we still have political choices to make about being part of the problem or part of the solution. This means engaging with ideas and purpose, not simply process and management.

In my view it is time to get back in touch with the energy, commitment and creative anger that fuels civil society in its quest for global justice and which rediscovers the educational potential and significance of popular social movements. We know that knowledge grows best when it is created through dialogue and social interaction, and when it is spread around. (Crowther 2005) Sharing a common purpose with others about issues that matter, and which are national and international in their repercussions, is both exhilarating and socially responsible, in ways that the individualised quest for self-improvement is not. Taking action makes you think. It makes you challenge what is usually taken for granted. Acquiring insight leads to

more questions. Finding answers is the stuff of reason, investigation, communication, inspiration and social change.

The search for answers might be artistic, practical, theoretical. The expression of critical thinking does not need esoteric language or the proliferation of qualifications but it does need dedicated teachers who can make relevant and practical connections in imaginative and democratic ways. The kinds of knowledge that education can help to produce and contribute to better understanding is the essential ingredient a democracy needs if it is to flourish and continually re-invent itself from one generation to the next. The popular creation of knowledge, linked to social action, makes sense in a troubled world because supporting a campaign or joining a movement is a powerful way of learning through experience and making history, rather than simply enduring it. It is precisely this kind of informal learning that fuels the desire for more knowledge-making and more actively democratic societies. (McGivney 1999)

And as a result, well-informed and more knowledgeable citizens are better equipped to take responsible and effective action on their own behalf. They are more likely to hold their leaders to account for the policies and actions they take - including their response to global poverty. When the current state of adult learning gets written about by future historians, it is hard to imagine a more important contribution we could have made.

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