The Addendum

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I had originally intended to completely revise my original article on the state and status of adult education in the UK, with particular reference to the liberal curriculum. But try as I might, the words would just not come. Not a writer's block, I might add, but simply I was unconvinced that a revision of the 'official narrative' about learning and adults would suffice.

My previous writing was largely in that vein; an officialese version of how education is seen. It bows to the national story of adult education, which in unvarnished terms, had been about a mass sell-out of values to the idea that all that truly matters (in the pragmatic British experience) is the funding of learning to earn. Or, as you would put it, the 'UK plc' concept that made a huge impact on adult learning since the days of Margaret Thatcher. This is a post-Thatcher world, and in many respects the ongoing narrative about learning has remained wholly within the vocational domain. How can we improve the growth of the UK economy via pulling the levers of further education? How to train and re-train individuals to compete within a rapidly changing workplace? How do we create work-ready people, without expecting them to believe that they are 'owed' something in return?

In many ways, national learning reciprocity has ended. It ended when any mention of learning-as-a-right for all became a derisory concept. Romantic, but not practicable. Or when the idea of adult learning became tarnished with the image that such endeavours concerned primarily blue-haired elderly folk learning about the delights of stately homes. Learning for leisure was acceptable. But only if it were paid for by those who wished to indulge their interests. Government money, extracted with menaces from 'hard-working families' (the 'Tax Payer' in earlier parlance), was meant for serious stuff like creating a new generation of tradespeople. Or tech' people. Or social care workers. Or hospital staff. Or any other panic-ridden need that was in the media and political focus at the time.

The notion of learning was of practicality. If we were to invest in colleges and universities, then there needed to be recognisable returns on the investment. The cohort that was processed through the system should, by definition, be able to repay its privilege in learning in some manner. This could be by repaying loans on fees, of course, but equally it could be by acting within one's life as a component towards the national target for growth. Growth brings prosperity. Prosperity brings happiness. Happiness brings stability. Stability brings growth. And on, and on.

The rotating wheels of industry and commerce required fuel, not just from finance, but also from a population committed to the national good through competitive living. We have foreigners to deal with, after all. We have immigrants who want our jobs. We must be job-fit at all times.

But all was not well. Some of us (myself being a clear example) felt that this whole agenda was a fraught with fragility. Though one could heartily agree with the need for training in skills that could provide a livelihood, there was something missing. A kind of adequacy. An attitude which said ‘there’s more to life than simply having a job, a car, a partner, and a mortgage’. Small though this matter was, it nagged away in the background of both educational discourse and the realities of a societal life. The fragility lay in the lack of a return on the commitment to the skills agenda. The idea that further education training could solve (or mitigate) the nation’s problems relied purely on a putative consideration that materialism provided the kind of psychological satisfaction that was sufficient for a stable society. A society that minimised alienation, and produced lasting communities.

But it seems that history has not born that assumption out. Societal division has grown over the past thirty years. We find ourselves not just politically polarised, but also divided over confidence in society’s foundations. Democracy, science, and belonging are not the ‘givens’ that they once were. By this, I mean that though the functions of democracy exist, the spirit that imbued them with value is under assault. Though we rely more and more on our technology to solve our problems, our confidence in its veracity has sprung leaks. That wonderful category of respected social magicians, scientists, are no longer unequivocally respected in a way that they once were. Belonging (in terms of being part of a social contract based on reciprocity) is no longer clear cut. Old class values and their consequent communities have disappeared as deindustrialisation took hold. Individuals were left to their own devices, getting on their bikes and serving themselves. Scaremongering about personal identity, equity in marriage, notions of sexuality, the safety of children, the fear of those not like ‘us’, and the hidden abuses apparently at the core of once trusted national institutions, become prominent. We are increasingly divided from another. We are seduced by social paranoia, whether real or imagined. Who can we trust? Only the solitary self.

Don’t get me wrong, I am not arguing here that the reason why this happened is because of the abandonment of a rose-tinted educational principles. What I am arguing is that the public dialectic that enabled coherent discussion of the above issues has fallen into decay. The ‘public sphere’ (as envisioned by Jurgen Habermas) has almost disappeared, and we find ourselves in fewer and fewer safe zones where discourse can happen without the eyes of corporate interests peering over our shoulders. The Internet, that great leveller, did not produce the utopian paradise of coherent thought and personal growth. Instead, it evolved almighty self-defeating struggles over content, veracity, rationality and myth.

All is up for grabs; all is saleable.

That we need a public sphere of some sort, where honesty is not used as a weapon, and where empathy is a watchword, is surely essential to combat this alienating decay? Adult education is not the only solution, but it certainly is one of the most understandable and powerful. It is already part of a public inheritance, and lives in small enclaves (such as ‘Never Stop Learning’) where there is a desire to not simply set agendas, but to foster coherent processes that can evolve in their own way. Human beings like taking part, and greatly value being respected for taking part. It is something in our nature: to be a person who grows because we participate in supportive environments. When this is achieved, then the importance of materialism becomes relative. The relevance of belonging cannot be created by materialism alone.

Our great weakness as educators is in having little confidence in this principle, even though the evidence for thinking otherwise has been strong over the past three decades. When Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger wrote their ground-breaking book ‘Situated Learning (1997), they used their broad anthropological research to show how learning naturally develops in social groupings ranging from African tailors to American non-drinking alcoholics. When I first read their work it was an utter revelation. It dumped a whole range of assumptions about learning out of the academic window. This especially included the highly individualised concepts around learning styles, behaviourism, positivism, and the most radical of all: that learning can only take place in an individual mind. For Lave, learning was a community matter, mediated through social interaction. We learn by being with others, and the individual matter of assimilating information or skill is a function OF this process, rather than its foundation. Effectively, the Community of Practice was born.

Please note that I am not making the obvious ‘naturalistic fallacy’ here. I do not imply that what is natural must necessarily be good for all societies. What I am saying is that the workings of learning have been confusingly misinterpreted in the past.

Lave’s ideas are not a new suggestion. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein had asserted as much back in the early 1950s in his work on Language Games and Forms of Life. Jean Piaget, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky and Ernst von Glasersfeldt had all suggested similar ideas as they promoted the idea of constructivism (learning is not simply assimilated, it is constructed by social interaction). This was a respected movement, and a key to a large scale ‘unified theory’ of learning. So why did it not become the dominant discourse within the UK? Why do we still see it as an interesting theory, but not practical as a foundation for curriculum growth? Or how the workers and citizens of the future are developed?

Because of its implied association with a socialist narrative. Because of the rise (and rise) of individualism. Because of a sense of society predicated on the democracy-of-economy (how you spend your money) rather than the democracy-of-dialogue. Because of a fear within governments of all perspectives, that selling a story of social development would not win votes. People want bread today, not pie in the future. Learning about learning has always been a specialist pass-time in the UK. It is easy to believe that, because you’ve been to school, that you know everything you need to know about how learning happens.

Hence we make valiant efforts as teachers and organisers to make learning accessible and useful to the potential learners. But consistently fail to produce the kind of self-directed learning that helps us all deal with a rapidly changing society. Our students have learned the facts, but not how to manage the facts in a way that prevents dogmatism, whilst maintaining substantive coherent rationality. We are not failing because we lack the teaching skills, or the formative concepts. We fail because we are competing with historic precedents that need unlearning. Both within us and those we work with.

Social development is as important as economic development. Social cohesion (being able to live in a hugely diverse society) is not something that spontaneously comes into existence because we happen to become monetarily wealthy. It arrives because we rationally understand what is happening around us, and the morally acceptable options we have available. As a **WHOLE** society, not just the privileged few. It is in promoting this sense of understanding that is adult learning's key role in the 21st century. Indeed, one might well argue that this has always been its role, but the acute urgency has truly become apparent today. We must, as Abraham Lincoln once said (in very different circumstances), *"Think anew and act anew"* as part of the general renewal of learning. I know that we are still up to this challenge. The question is: do we sincerely wish to take it on board? I leave that question to you.

BGMcD