

Narratives, Learning Cultures and the WEA

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I've been teaching as a part-time tutor for the WEA Northern District now for nearly twenty years. It's a job that has its ups and downs (thankfully more of the former than the latter) and many advantages. One of these is the diversity of the work: the opportunity to see adult learning in action from a wide variety of perspectives. An unspoken problem though continues to be the very routine of day-to-day teaching... the coming and going of courses and students, administration and form-filling week upon week. Such a routine often makes one forget to ask oneself really vital questions, such as 'Why is adult education important?' and 'Is the WEA really needed at all?' The everyday grind has an insidiously 'numbing' effect, allowing complacency and self-satisfaction to grow unawares, so much so that the whys and wherefores of education are easily overlooked in the rush to find funds and administer courses. Nevertheless, whilst it may seem like overdoing things to ask searching philosophical questions of oneself every day, an occasional healthy return to fundamental issues aids in reflecting on whether what one does is worthwhile, and whether an adjustment or two is due in work priorities and methods. It's with regard to this matter (asking fundamental educational questions) that my article concerns itself.

For me, the important holiday periods are the time for thinking, and a little reading. At the risk of sounding 'anorakish' I find a mid-term retreat for some serious reading and cogitating one of the most decisive ways of getting the batteries charged up again for work. I tend to read material I wouldn't normally do during term time, and it was during a recent spring trip to North Wales that I picked up a book that started a period of 'questioning'. Curiously it wasn't a book on education, but one on neurology, namely Oliver Sacks' famous volume of psychoneurological case studies '*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*'. Apart from being a good read in its own right (full of compassion and empathy... I recommend it to everyone), one of Sacks' cases caught my imagination in particular: that of Mr Thompson, in the chapter entitled '*A Matter of Identity*'.

Mr. Thompson was diagnosed as suffering from a severe condition entitled 'Korsakov's Psychosis' in which the ability to retain coherent memory is lost and the sufferer must literally reinvent his life from moment to moment. My cursory description cannot describe the appalling nature of the condition; Mr Thompson had (has?) no contact with reality, has no past and no way of realising a past... he constantly 'confabulates' stories around his life in order to give it a sustained meaning – but meaning that is only retained for the moment that the fable is being told. All memory of his statements is lost within the instant of utterance. His manic story telling seems brilliant and witty, but underneath there is a frantic urge to fill in the yawning abyss of no-memory, no-recall, with invention ... continuously avoiding the black hole of personal dissolution. Worse still, Mr Thompson does not know that this is happening... he is lost to all self-awareness. Sacks comments that there "*is the sense in which he is 'de-souled'*" (Sacks, 1985).

There is a horrific fascination about this memory devastation, for it indicates something scarily fundamental about what it is to be a human being and how tentatively we each retain our sense of self and individuality. Sacks remarks that "*Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through and in us – through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and not least our discourse, our spoken narrations*" (ibid. my underlining). Mr Thompson has, in a very real sense, lost his sense of 'narrative', (his very 'soul') through his condition and is left a virtual automaton: physically functioning but not 'being'. It's amazing what this says about us, lucky

enough not to have faced this nightmare: we are what we are through our personal ‘grand narratives’, formed over a lifetime of social contact, perceptive experience, and, (surprise, surprise!) our learning... something which gives each of our histories an unique value and colour. *“Biologically, physiologically we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives – we are each of us unique”* (ibid. my underlining). If this is the case, then it says that we, as people, are not simply biological organisms, but also made from our experiences, and in particular our articulated social experiences. It also means that our learning and knowledge (one might interpret this as the meaning we individually invest in experience) is fundamentally important and derives from our distinctive contacts with others.

I was surprised to discover that this contradicts much that I was led to believe with regard to learning theory. I had been ‘classically’ taught as a teacher, and in that specific framework, learning is an internalised mental affair, something one does individually (I’m sure many teachers have this view). Much of the emphasis in teaching was on methods of enhancing individual, need-driven, mental assimilation of fact and skill. Sacks’ remarkable case study seems to signify the contrary: our individuality (i.e. our learned ‘narrative’) comes from being part of a group or groups, and derives from society itself. We literally ‘find ourselves’ in social situations! Consequently, what the teacher teaches would appear to deserve a lower priority than the group situation in which the learning happens.

Strangely enough, Sacks’ neurological cases tie in well with mainstream research into adult learning. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in their book *‘Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation’* make the point that *“Conventional explanations view learning as a process by which a learner internalises knowledge”* and *“furthermore, learning as internalisation is too easily construed as the unproblematic process of absorbing the given”* (Lave & Wenger, 1991, my underlining). But Sacks’ story seems to indicate that being a person (learning to be) is not about simply ‘absorbing the given’ (i.e. absorbing fact) but about experience and social life itself. In William F. Hanks’ words, commenting on Lave and Wenger, *“Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind... Learning is, as it were, distributed among coparticipants, not a one person act”* (ibid.). Lave and Wenger’s book examines the nature of learning through a variety of practical case-studies and makes the startling assertion that learning is purely a social matter, not, as conventionally thought, an individualistic one. Furthermore, it *“crucially involves participation in a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed in – the culture of practice”* (ibid.). Learning is about becoming part of a particular culture, about adding this culture to the ‘grand narrative’ of life.

Looking back on all this, readers may well find this (hopefully) interesting, but wonder what it has all got to do with the WEA? Returning to my initial two questions is the real issue here. How can I say, truthfully, that adult education is important? And does Britain really need the WEA at all? The standard answers to these questions tend to be conventional appeals to social construction and to the WEA’s historic role in socio-educational development. Most of us, at one time or another, either as tutors or volunteers, have had to publicly justify what makes the WEA different and needed by using the ‘party line’ on participation and voluntarism, together with the student-centred nature of the learning involved in our work. However, with most other adult, further and community education institutions claiming to do this very same thing (having ‘hijacked’ the WEA’s agenda in some respects) it seems a very weak argument to say ‘we did it first’ as a justification for our continued role in the post-compulsory education system. We surely have to look again at what we do to see the justifiable value in it, and I would add, determine what our true educational role is.

My arguments above about Sacks, Lave and Wenger are my attempt at answering this fundamental problem. The WEA, above every other educational institution in this country, has

the extraordinary resource of being social, voluntary, devolved (theoretically?), small-scale and with a unique 'narrative' of its own, passed down through a communal ethos and practice. It is not just that we are participative (many institutions are) but that we have evolved a '**culture of practice**' in Lave and Wenger's terms, an invaluable foundation for learning which is almost impossible to create via intention alone, but which comes about through the legitimate participation of its members over many years. It is the WEA's ethos of voluntarism and Branch work, it's unique culture, which delineates and empowers the Association's learning practices... not our courses themselves. Adults learn by being part of the WEA 'experience', by being able to take part, gain and give feedback, involve themselves (peripherally or in depth) and extend both their own personal life narratives and, coincidentally, the WEA's... which in truth is what lifelong learning is all about. From this viewpoint all that stuff about the value of unaccredited liberal-academic education that we desperately try to justify does seem to have an underpinning 'philosophy' after all. Support for this seemingly revolutionary idea is already in evidence. Recently, Prof. Frank Coffield of Newcastle University noted that "*Teaching and learning remain, even for experts in education, unproblematical processes of transmission and assimilation, but no Learning Society can be built on such atheoretical foundations*" but in contrast "*a social theory of learning argues that learning is located in social participation as well as in the heads of individuals; and it shifts the focus from a concentration on individual cognitive processes to the social relationships and arrangements which shape, for instance, positive and negative 'learner identities'...*" (Coffield, 1999)

It is my belief that being a WEA tutor is about fostering 'learning cultures'. This entails far more than just writing 'action words' for learning outcomes (in fact, it seems essential that learning outcomes arise from the culture of learning itself instead of being imposed on it. Hanks comments that "*where the learner is performing routinely, this kind of abstract exam is less relevant*" (ibid.)). Being a WEA tutor is about creating an environment in which adults' personal 'narratives' (which Sacks hints at so dramatically), can be valued and contribute to (in Lave's terms) a 'participation framework' of learning. If we wish to widen participation, then it's to WEA culture that we should turn, emphasising its enjoyable, fulfilling nature in order to attract the 87% of adults who currently don't participate in any recognisable learning at all (NIACE stat's 1999). Consequently we need to take enormous care to ensure that our project work has embedded within it the same 'culture of practice' that allows identification with the wider WEA ethos, linking it with the Branch community tradition. Similarly management crucially needs the vision to encourage those best aspects of the WEA culture that enhance the effects of social learning across the whole range of WEA activity. The WEA already has a unique asset in its evolved learning culture, and we lose it at our peril, for it may, in the long term, be the only determinant as to why British society really needs the Workers' Educational Association.

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