The Private, the Public and the Common Good – loss and learning in a contemporary Research Circle

Sharon Clancy and Iain Jones

Abstract

Key words: adult education, research circle, Centenary Commission on Adult Education, policy trail, collaborative research, democratic education, social justice

Introduction

In this article we explore our collaborative practices, since 2020, designed to nurture a distinctive form of research circle informed by, but different from, those first developed by Swedish adult educators. We firstly review the origins and practices of the research circle both in Sweden and in our work in the UK. Then, secondly, we ask how our work and its particular form of collaborative engagement has been shaped by resistance to 'hollowed out' forms of lifelong learning that have marginalized, or forgotten, those radical forms of adult education that have shaped our own practice and thinking. Finally, we ask how a collaborative ethnography born out of our emerging friendship [1] has enabled us to critically examine the development of our own practices and personal stories within the context of a research circle on 'Fostering community, democracy and dialogue'. Threaded through the article is a collective hope that we are contributing to the democratic educational space for learning that 'Forum' holds together.

The wider histories, origin, and characteristics of research circles are reviewed in Swedish research on practice[2]. This relates to our own collaborative work in two ways. Earlier research reported that the context of each circle in Sweden varied, ranging from studying a specific problem - and the needs of a particular group of workers in a single setting - to responding to a national crisis of the public sector[3]. We also began from an explicit position: a sense that dominant forms of lifelong learning were an impoverished response to local, national, and international crises. Our political imperative also reflects Harnsten's emphasis on the place of research circles as part of a 'collective counterattack'[4] - against the practices of conservative governments who threatened the achievements of the welfare state. In our instance, before our first event in May 2021[5], we argued that the overall purpose of our Research Circle was to ask why adult education needs to be radically reshaped and how inclusive forms of adult education, that engage marginalised communities, could be re-built.

The circle emerged from the activities of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education launched, in November 2018, by a consortium including the University of Nottingham, the University of Oxford, the Co-operative College, the Raymond Williams Foundation, and the

Workers' Educational Association. The Commission's remit mirrored that of its predecessor in 1919, but its focus was specifically to set out a vision for life-wide adult lifelong education for the 21st century; a challenge we have been keen to take up in our research circle work. We now reflect on the origins and practices of the research circle. We ask how we can seek to nurture and include 'missing and marginalised voices' in the context of community, democracy and dialogue. Throughout, we examine how this lens reflects the wider need for reconstruction of adult education as a common good, how everyday lived experience, in the lives of ordinary people, helps create the constitutive processes of culture, the ways in which it is made and shaped by human and ecological agency.

By reflecting on the originating purpose, form/s and pedagogies of the research circle, we take as our starting point here the notion that research circles offer a form of collaborative practice and dialogue between academics and practitioners in higher education, community spaces and in adult lifelong education[6].

Origins and practices of the research circle: The long Lens

We begin by returning to 2018 when a group of adult educators, recognising the historic importance of the 1919 Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee's Final Report[7], set up the Adult Education 100 campaign. The campaign sought to encourage a programme of activities, centred on the centenary of the 1919 Report, which would both recover and re-evaluate the twentieth-century history of adult education, and set out a vision for life-wide adult lifelong education for the 21st century through their report, *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning for 21st Century Britain* (2019)[8], in the face of ongoing cuts to adult and community education, across the board. This approach required a cultural-historical critical lens and a recognition of both the disjuncture and parallels between 1919 and 2019 to inform the creation of the 21st century report.

In 1919, the Ministry of Reconstruction published an extraordinarily powerful report, visionary in its scope and practical in its detail, as Britain recovered from the devastating effects of the First World War and the Spanish Flu Pandemic, which argued for the key role adult education had to play in fostering an active democracy, enriching communities, and nourishing curiosity and a love of learning. Adult education, it argued, was 'a permanent national necessity'. The authors of the 1919 Report were drawn from a spectrum of those with an interest in rejuvenating the economy and society after the devastation of world war, along with those with experience in delivering adult education. When the 1919 Report was written, there was a need to address and challenge the rugged heterogeneity implied by a truly democratic education at a time when the establishment was fearful of dissent and citizen's voices. This was apparent in establishment responses to the 1919 report where suspicion about the role of the state and fear of the power conferred on adult learners were clear. For instance, one tutor was reputedly told upon requesting a room for educational

meetings by a Local Authority official, 'If we let you have a room you will make the place a den of anarchists' (p. 207)[9]. This tension and lack of trust was mutual in that the Report identified that some of the 'workers' demonstrated a similar level of suspicion 'towards such facilities for classes as are offered by the Local Authorities' (ibid.) [10].

The Centenary Commission on Adult Education Report: *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning for 21st Century Britain* (2019) faced many similar issues. Published in pre-Covid pandemic times it, nevertheless, like its predecessor, required a stark recognition that we are living at a critical time, facing a series of social, political, economic, health, technological and demographic challenges, alongside the deepening impact of austerity and a narrowing vision of education with a strong establishment opposition to a critically literate citizenry. The report, and the more recent work of the Commission (since 2020), has sought to act for the good of our democracy, society, economy, and for the health and wellbeing of our citizens. A core chapter in the Report was entitled 'Fostering community, democracy and dialogue through adult lifelong'[11]. The chapter begins with the following quotation from the 1919 Report – "An uneducated democracy cannot be other than a failure".

Building on the concept of the 'policy trail' [12], we now trace how these origins of the report, published in 2019, provided, in turn, the origins for the development and formation of the research circle on 'Fostering and building community, democracy and dialogue' in 2020. By asking *why* 'Fostering and building community, democracy and dialogue' we emphasise the importance of a key chapter in the report. At the heart of this chapter is a series of interviews with community and voluntary activists and leaders of social movements, sought out by three members of the Commission who were keen to hear from the people working with communities often on the fringes of society in ways consistent with the original vision of the Ministry of Reconstruction: "it seems to us vital to provide the fullest opportunities for personal development and for the realisation of a higher standard of citizenship. Too great an emphasis has been laid on material considerations and too little regard paid to other aspects of life"[13].

On July 9th, 2020, the Commission held an event, 'Reconstructing Society: Research Circles', hosted by the Co-operative College, with the aim of beginning to develop self-directed groups/study circles on the following issues that explored how to build on the 2019 report:

- What has been learned from the COVID-19 experience that is of lasting value?
- How can learning take place online and still be embedded in local contexts?
- What kinds of learning will be needed after the lockdown? For what purposes, and for whom?

This event, with a sub-title and emphasis on 'Fostering community, democracy and dialogue', caught the imagination of practitioners and academics alike. It was a catalyst for the Research Circle on this theme that then began to meet from September 2020 onwards.

In the second section of the article, we now examine these collaborative practices and ask how and why our work has taken a particular form.

Senses of loss and hope? Collaboration, participation and engagement in the research circle

The Circle was originally made up of ten active members, drawn from a range of backgrounds in adult, further and higher education, the voluntary and community sector and trade union education. Six of us now meet. In our practices, we share a deep commitment to social purpose education and our objective has been the sharing of experience and critical engagement, designed to explore and generate new and existing forms of practice in the generation of hope. Since the Spring of 2021 the group has worked to develop a range of activities and collected resource and documents to support the Circle by creating background blogs that review events[14].

At our first meeting as a research circle steering group in September 2020, it was apparent that we were a diverse group, and that each of us felt, and shared, individual and collective senses of a loss of policy memory and a wilful forgetting - about particular forms of adult education - by the wider establishment. This has, in part, created the conditions for hollowed out forms of lifelong learning that we critique - and challenge. In turn, funding regimes have re-produced an instrumental focus on restricted forms of skills for learning and work and have marginalised or, at the worst, withdrawn funding from expansive forms of lifelong and life wide education and learning. In some senses we view ourselves as activist-educators, forced too often to respond to the demands of the education market, being pushed into competition with similar organizations, and facing threats to the defence of our time for long-term thinking. Barrie Trinder has elaborated on the importance of the animateur role, describing true adult educators as '*animateurs*, the term used by French educationalists, charged with the responsibility of creating lasting structures, whose disappearance, after completing their allotted tasks, was always predictable. Their legacy might be publications, changed attitudes, and voluntary bodies continuing their work' [15]. In our case, we have written blog posts, presented our work at research circle events and conferences and co-edited a book *Lived Experience, Lifelong Learning, Community Activism and Social Change* (2024).

We argued from the start that so much of the legacy of adult education – outside and within higher and further education - and those aspects of it that endure, even if tenuously, is found in relationships, shared histories and community. It is also political. As Andrew Sanchez points out, class and constructions of class can be grossly over-simplified and individualised: "conceptual models of the precariat fail to grasp class as a dynamic historical object that intersects with experiences of struggle, decline, hope, and fatalism"[16]. For Sanchez, our concepts of ourselves as belonging to a particular class – not just a group of

individuals living precariously - with a shared history, memories, and instances of managing previous struggles, is all-important in countering a sense of despair and impotence, particularly in the communities hardest hit by the exigencies of the past four decades and the more recent Covid-19 pandemic.

Secondly, a series of 'epistemological issues', and the potential of the research circle approach (RCA) for developing democratic forms of collaborative research, also relate to our work. In their original form, participants in research circles combined the tacit knowledge of union members and the different expertise of researchers. The interchanges between the knowledges of researcher and practitioner, and the potential for dialogue, begin from the premise that there is value in the knowledge and experience of each participant. In their review of how to design a research circle Holmstrand and Harnsten highlighted the characteristics of the circle and the nature of participation: developing 'trust' ('to get to know one another'), the importance of 'voice' ('listening to different perspectives on a problem') and 'time' (to 'define and describe the problem')[17]. Their later analysis of 'knowledgeable action' emphasises that our own knowledge of the problems we are working to understand may be emergent, diffuse and situated – but 'democratic knowledge processes' embody potential for innovative thinking within each context [18]. It is in these processes of work that research circles may offer potential for change and development – through collaboration.

This is why we have chosen to analyse our Research Circle activities through the lens of narrative and collaborative autoethnography in the final section of the article. Our argument is that an autobiographical approach allows us to examine 'how the relations between theory and practice are understood and (if they are) productive'[19]. Before then, we briefly examine the development of the events we have organised and key ideas that have begun to emerge from our practices.

'Piecing together threads': The development of events

Since Spring 2021, the members of the research circle have organised twelve national and two regional events with speakers from different regions and countries of the UK and Ireland, Norway, Italy, Canada and the United States and further contributions from over 200 participants (please see Appendix document summarizing all the events from 2021-24)[20]. Each event has been predicated on Raymond Williams' concept of 'Resources for a Journey of Hope'. By combining local, regional, national and international dimensions of learning our emphasis has been on challenging issues of power and control over education and democratic engagement. We recognise democracy is in crisis and also the widespread unease pervading communities, politics, economics, and education connected to the sustainability of the entire planet. Many years ago, Raymond Williams described Westminster as an 'elected court', a state of affairs which has deepened in recent times.

Over-centralised states, which may be both authoritarian and paternalistic, tend to problematise communities more than identify them as sources of democratic hope. There is a growing recognition that we must learn our way – collaboratively and democratically - to a better, more hopeful, inclusive and sustainable future. How we do this as part of a shared project is a massive challenge. Ideals, ends and means are all important – we must learn how to nurture real dialogue as part of the process of changing communities – and expose the challenges that activists face if, as Williams said, the ultimate objective of adult education should be its support for "an educated and participating democracy"[21].

We now highlight two issues, from our reflections, on how – and why – we have begun this recurring process of nurturing dialogue and what we have learnt from listening to, and thinking through, practice. Firstly, we focus on the power of 'voice'. Memorably, in one of our 2022 research circle events, Sally Bonnie spoke about her work as a community activist. Joined by other women from Oldham, in the North West of England, theirs was a powerful statement of collective voice. In her blog, on the Centenary Commission website, Sally highlighted her pride – in the development of a women's centre, Inspire Oldham:

> From the outset Inspire has been about collective participation de-emphasising the role of traditional hierarchies. How we operate is important because it sends out a clear message that says, "you can connect here, you can contribute here, you can learn here, you can re-discover the gifts, the assets you left behind when you began to see yourself only as a set of labels defined by others".

But this pride in 'new power' co-existed with a recognition and frustration at how 'old power' marginalised and limited their work. The work of Henry Timms and Jeremy Heimans resonated with Sally. She recognised that:

> 'old power' is held by a few and once gained it's guarded, it's closed, inaccessible. In comparison to the authentic space we have created at Inspire, so many external interactions with policy makers are in the forms of systems based on old power structures. Even when you are invited to "co-produce" or "contribute", 'old power" watches over the proceedings. The best description I ever heard of this scenario was "It's like being invited to a party and then being told what to do". So much needs to change here in terms of relocation of power.

Secondly, we highlight our learning about the importance of imagination in the education of adults and how it can enlarge the imaginative franchise by helping us to re-imagine our future. In our second event of this year (2024), Sharon and Professor Liz Hoult engaged in a dialogue about how we manage the precarity and complexity of the contemporary world in which we operate, and the burgeoning need to replace the metaphors of progress, growth

and expansion with the metaphors of holding, stillness and renewed self-generation. We considered this through remembering forgotten and less celebrated models of education and intellectual traditions, such as adult residential spaces and community learning, as well as looking for inspiration from thinkers who acknowledge loss, pain and vulnerability as a means of transformation for a sustainable future. We talked about the stories we tell ourselves *about* adult learning on the one hand, and the way it does and does not feature in histories of education. On the other, we focused on the place of storytelling, through Liz's own writing about her relationship with her mother, and poetry, through Sharon's poetry writing about her grandmother, *as* adult education and, in particular, on the role of working-class women, their voices, memories and capacity for storytelling, as central to finding a means of standing in our own power.

Personal, private and community: The place of a collaborative autoethnography

In our introduction, we argued that collaborative autoethnography, as a method, involves researchers sharing how personal stories relate to their sociocultural contexts. In the final section of the article, we build on the work of Klevan and Grant[22], and ask how tensions between the 'wild' and the 'tamed'[23] in the academy, have shaped the research circle and our own thinking about the events we have organised, and how personal and professional tensions between these two statuses relate to our own work as the two lead convenors of the Research Circle.

As convenors of the Research Circle, we each occupy different positions within higher education. One of us has a full-time post at a UK Russell Group University, with, until very recently, an emphasis on teaching and marginal spaces for research, whilst the other retired from a full-time teaching post in a UK university (with an institutional history of teacher education) in August 2020 and now combines a part-time post teaching and supervising Doctoral students and work with the Circle. However, for both of us, the collective act of developing work is bound up with finding spaces for recovering policy memories that have not been lost – but have been marginalised by dominant forms of lifelong learning within, and outside, higher education.

We have used our friendship, which has evolved throughout the four years in which we have co-convened the research circle, as the lens through which we have been able to recognise our own liminality in accessing a world 'beyond the divide'. We have understood recurring tensions between 'wild time' (playful, risky, and transgressive) and 'tamed time' (commodified, controlled, and instrumental), and our own struggles to break free and create space for the former. We have continued to ask how we might make space and time for criticality in the face of the onslaught of teaching, marking and the many other aspects of our work which shape 'finding time' for thinking, writing, reflection and activism. We have

also contended with deep loss at a personal level – Sharon's close friend, Julie, Iain's mother and two of our closest intellectual mentors, Nigel Todd and Professor John Field. How do we manage this intensity?

> 'Under technological capitalism, growing numbers of people are leading hurried, frenetic and pressured lives or experiencing exclusion…. place becomes significant as a location of solidarity with others''[24].

We have experienced this not just as a constant tension but also as a recurring and shifting sense of loss, amplified by our search for the 'common good' and a connected place/space in adult education. This has been juxtaposed with spaces left for debate and dialogue and disorientated by coming up against forms of policy amnesia and wilful forgetting, which have made access to learning about the concerns, issues and problems that are most real to people, now and in historical terms, so hard to reach. Perhaps the most powerful feature of our work together, alongside listening to and learning from our peers and colleagues, has been less about *reviving* and more about *asserting* the power of the work of others who came before us and can inform our work in the future. We have sought to be 'backward travellers' as George Ewart Evans described it, aiming to:

> not so much *know* the past as *feel* it'. ...For history is not the mechanical acquisition of knowledge about the past: it is more than anything else the imaginative reconstruction of it[25].

Using Evans' thinking as a way in we have sought to immerse ourselves, to travel inwardly to *feel* the past rather than just *knowing* it, from our own immediate environments, through a process of engaging in imaginative or narrative reconstruction. We have been fortunate, in particular, to have Linden West as one of our key research circle members from the beginning, who has described in many of his works the ways in which people make, and are not just made by, history and has used narrative as a means of engaging the "psychosocial, historical and educational imagination" [26].

We have deliberately placed ourselves as part of this narrative act. In Jane Miller's notion of 'the autobiography of the question' (originally applied to a reflection on her work with colleagues and students learning to become secondary school English teachers at the Institute of Education in the 1980s and '90s) the objective is to focus on issues, concerns and problems that are real to people, irrespective of the educational context, and which guide the direction of an inquiry. In turn, the Research Circle took as its initial inspiration the Swedish circle model which emerged from 'the struggle of social movements in the late 1900s and early 2000s popular education in Sweden', and developed into 'educational practices, such as study circles…with a unique level of participation'[27]. More recent reading, such as Miller's work, and the responses from those who participated in the

roundtable/seminar we co-facilitated at the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) and The Standing Committee on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA)in July 2024[28], has taken us into the realms of thinking how we stay true to our own values and practices by situating ourselves both *personally* and *historically* in the complex network of social relations that constitute our lives and our research. Rather than seeing this as 'an incitement to self-indulgent introspection'[29], we have discovered that autobiographical reflections enable us, and those we learn with, to 'put their own lives and development into the argument' by 'historicising the questions they are addressing' and by 'setting their lives and educational history within contexts more capacious than their own'[30].

We are increasingly having to do this work both outside the state, as well as within it, after swathes of funding cuts to adult/community education infrastructure and a new neo-liberal onslaught within some universities on the humanities, targeting budgets for art, music, theatre, literature, sociology and music. In July 2021 it was confirmed that Government cuts to funding for English universities would halve the subsidy for creative and arts subjects whilst increasing investment in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), medicine and healthcare, following the (then) government's priorities. A recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies[31] highlighted contemporary risks. It identified that the proportion of higher education providers in deficit, weighted by their total income, increased from 1 in 10 to 1 in 5. But, simultaneously, this future is not only marked by cuts to institutional and departmental funding and these wider risks. These conditions, in turn, re-produce compulsive working. Gornall and Salisbury[32] , in their study of academic 'Working Lives', characterise this as a form of 'hyper-professionality'. We, and others joining research circle events, have nurtured spaces for the research circle in self-directed and self-managed fragments of time but these moments of 'slowing down' have contrasted sharply with the catalogue of other demands.

In an echo of Harnsten's emphasis on the place of earlier research circles in Sweden, as part of a 'collective counterattack' [33], in our blog post [34] after the first event in May 2021, we highlighted the power and richness of each presentation. One of the Research Circle members summed up this vital role in his reflections after the event: "I felt all the presenters, in their different ways, were saying something similar: [we need] spaces in which dialogue, cooperative learning, democracy and community can begin to thrive". Another participant emphasised: "Today has sown some seeds and demonstrated a collective impetus, for which I'm grateful". This impetus can draw on Williams' resources of hope and continually remind us that "to be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing"[35] . A speaker also highlighted that through our collective action we can create a place for "remembering, not forgetting, past practices", enabling us to store and share our memories of creative policy responses and practice.

In a further reminder of Harnsten, we seek to keep alive these conversations which focus on making learning "part of the process of social change itself"[36] and continue to develop

ourselves within this process as brokers, advocates, 'animateurs' and critical thinkers. As Williams said,

> There are ideas, and ways of thinking, with the seeds of life in them, and there are others, perhaps deep in our minds, with the seeds of a general death. Our measure of success in recognizing these kinds, and in naming them making possible their common recognition, may be literally the measure of our future[37].

Our specific work within the research circle is shaped by these values and our practices that have developed over time. For Sharon, the motivation for all of her practitioner and academic work interweaves social justice, class consciousness and adult education. Similarly, for Iain, his motivations in teaching and research combine social justice with the possibilities of transformative learning and adult education. Practice in the research circle has also been informed by critical engagement with Freire and Williams. The pedagogical implications of education for social change – of praxis and the 'pracademic' – have built on Freire's notion of teachers as "agents of curiosity" [38], with the idea of pedagogy as a political activity preeminent, particularly in the context of the contemporary neoliberal grind. This requires a process of continuous group discussion (dialogue), enabling people to acquire collective knowledge, through the circle, that they can use to change society. In the space of the four years we have worked together, another related dimension of 'time' is the place of 'personal memory and loss'. Although time passes, our memory of those closest to us (Iain's mum and Sharon's dad and close friend, Julie) does not fade. If anything, it strengthens as we slowly work through, and write out, what their memory means for us now. The same, ultimately, applies to Nigel Todd and John Field - two pre-eminent adult educators - whose loss we mourn but whose work continues to inspire our thinking and practice. They remain two people who guide us as we haltingly, but determinedly, work towards developing our current positionality. It was John Field who, with characteristic astuteness, recognised that:

> …..policy-makers have tended to concentrate on microprocessors rather than intimate relationships or even cultural change, at least in their approach to public policy[39].

Dr Sharon Clancy
Sharon.clancy@nottingham.ac.uk

Dr Iain Jones
i.jones@uwtsd.ac.uk

Notes

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Appendix: Summary of Research Circle Events 2021 – 2024

Three sets of online events have taken place in successive years between 2021 and 2024, each set with an overarching theme.

2021

In 2021, we examined 'Resources for Hope' during the Covid pandemic. This series of events provided an opportunity to learn about existing practices, meet and think about different forms of democratic adult education and imagine new forms of critical engagement. 50 adult educators, from across the UK, Italy, Bulgaria and Canada, joined together to listen to presentations and discuss key questions and emerging themes in small and large groups. During, and after, this first event series participants highlighted the power of learning about existing practices and ways of re-shaping new forms of adult lifelong education with an explicit social purpose.

The possibilities of an education for social change were woven through each presentation in our first series during 2021. (The 2021 presentations can be viewed on the Raymond Williams Foundation (RWF) YouTube site: see the links below.)

Rose Farrar, from WEA West Yorkshire, began by showcasing an innovative collaboration with **Rich Wiles**, an artist and photographer. The **power of the video-photo stories of the lives of refugees**, near Hull, was a starting point for dispelling stereotypes, myths and misconceptions. You can see this discussion here. What was especially important in this work was the idea that everyone has things to teach as well as learn; and how conviviality can be created in sharing food and storytelling.

Rob Peutrell and **Mel Cooke** then discussed **the voices of students and lecturers** and asked how the politics of ESOL relates to different forms of citizenship. They highlighted struggles between dis-citizenship, and having capacities stripped away, and acts of citizenship and contesting exclusions and claiming new rights. You can watch the discussion here. (Rob and Mel have also edited a book, *Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens: Exploring ESOL issues and principles*). Nalita James then asked how diverse forms of ESOL, in Leicester, related to different communities of place and multiple senses of belonging. You can see Nalita's contribution here.

Further presentations extended the discussions about the scope and range of practice – and why these matter for practice – and policy. **Richard Hazledine** reported on young adults, in Nottingham, who are furthest from work. Their mistrust and lack of confidence, because of what has been done 'to them', embodied the danger of scarring. This was a starting point for his work and re-thinking practices. You can see what he said here.

Elaine J. Laberge joined us from the west coast of Canada and argued why the Shoestring Initiative was formed. Communities of mentorship, advocacy, intercultural connectedness,

and belonging are being created for students with lived experiences of persistent poverty at Canadian universities.

The final presentation, by **Jeremy Goss** and **Jayne Ireland**, related the work of Raymond Williams on social purpose in adult education to contemporary practices – and to each of the other presentations. Williams' 1961 Open Letter to WEA tutors defined his own purpose as a teacher 'as the creation of an educated and participatory democracy'. Jeremy and Jayne argued that the foundations for a democratic curriculum could be developed by learning democratically, learning for democracy and learning about democracy. Watch them here.

2022: *Dialogues for Democracy: Cultures and Ecologies in Crisis*

The second series of events (2022) sought to develop and broaden our focus to examine and counter the current crises and hollowing out of representative and participatory democracy with three events focusing on 'Dialogues for Democracy: Cultures and Ecologies in Crisis'.

This link takes you to the RWF website and four films from 2022 events, including:

- Keynote presentation for Adult Education Research Circle – 'Dialogues for Democracy: Cultures and Ecologies in Crisis' – Health Inequalities in Communities: What is the role of Community Adult Education? chaired by Professor Marjorie Mayo, Emeritus Professor in Community Development at Goldsmiths, University of London. The event, on 17 May 2022, featured this keynote from Professor Sir Michael G. Marmot, FRCP, Director of the University College London, Institute of Health Equity entitled 'Build Back Fairer'.
- Video presentation by Professor Helen Chatterjee, Professor of Biology, in University College London Biosciences and UCL Arts and Sciences: The role of cultural, community and natural assets in addressing societal and structural health inequalities in the UK. At Dialogues for Democracy: Cultures and Ecologies in Crisis Health Inequalities in Communities: What is the role of Community Adult Education?
- Dr Ana Cruz's presentation, Professor of Education at St. Louis Community College-Meramec, who won the 2022 Paulo Freire Democratic Project Award of Social Justice: *Paulo Freire's Political-Pedagogical Approach to Education: Questioning Inequalities Through Dialogue.*

On June 10th, 2022, we focused on **ecological/climate emergency and environmental action**. This session aimed to debate and plan possibilities for adult lifelong education, tackling ecological climate emergency and taking environmental action. Short presentations were given by **Professor Steve Martin**, University of Nottingham; **Mel Lenehan**, Principal and CEO, Fircroft College, Birmingham, and **Ross Weddle**, Chair, WEA Green Branch. This was followed by opportunities to join discussion groups and plan action.

On September 15th, 2022, we looked at universities and their relationship to participatory action and social movements, asking 'What should the University's social and cognitive

responsibilities be in the face of rising inequality and injustice and how should research engage more directly with "real life" problems and politics? What is the role and function of the "public academic" and the critical activist?' The event featured 10-minute presentations from **Shirley Walters**, Professor Emerita from the University of Western Cape, South Africa, who talked about universities and their relationship to participatory action and social movements, and Dr **Michael Hrebeniak**, Convenor of the New School of the Anthropocene, who outlined the role of NSOTA, configured as a new kind of school which 'is born out of a need. Professor Emeritus Linden West, Canterbury Christ Church university, also dialogued with Professor **Laura Formenti** of the University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, about universities and social responsibility in Italy and the UK. An important link was made around the theme of dialogue and democracy in the classroom, and how this could build communities in diverse locations. The dialogue linked back to the tutorial class movement in the UK and family learning in Italy. Their argument was clear: we must practise what we preach. The mainstream university has proven unable and unwilling to engage with the condition of social crisis and the prospect of democratic and ecological ruin that characterise the 21st Century.

2023

In April and May 2023, we examined the possibilities of Learning Cities (using the case of Cork, Ireland) and listened to several dialogues/presentations: first, between Professor Linden West and Associate Professor Fergal Finnegan from Maynooth University on Learning Cities and the roots of Irish community education, which included Catholic Social Action and liberation theology. The second, with the Scottish academic, community activist, poet, psychotherapist, author and Freirean scholar, Colin Kirkwood and, thirdly, Professor Antonia Darder, in dialogue with Dr Jo Forster. The dialogues, in May, focused on the work, ideas and values of Latin American educator Paulo Freire, his critical as well as deeply relational pedagogy and the challenges and relevance of his work in the struggle for participative democracy today.

In October, we built on these earlier presentations and dialogues, in Spring 2023, by deepening connections with lived experiences and possibilities of democracy and learning - in specific places and neighbourhoods. By critically examining *Speaking Truth to Power: Putting Popular Education into Practice* Sharon, in conversation with Jan Vincent, Director of Aspire Learning Support and Wellbeing in Durham, discussed the importance of community adult education, the power of place in relation to community building and Jan's evolving work over many years, as both a learner in community adult education and her role as Director of a Women's Learning Centre, in response to the challenges of place-based activism. In another dimension of this theme Jo Forster met, in conversation with Niall Cooper, Director of Church Action on Poverty to review their *Speaking Truth to Power Programme*. It provides learning opportunities to people struggling against poverty to speak

up and take action on the root causes of poverty in the UK. By bringing together people with a diverse range of direct personal experiences of poverty to speak truth to power both locally and nationally, participants develop the skills, training and support to speak confidently and powerfully to local and national media, politicians and other power-holders. Jo and Niall asked how learners become effective campaigners and spokespeople in their own right and inspire others to action.

The contributions to each of the events, in 2023, highlighted the power of listening to voices that have been systematically marginalised and those whose experiences challenge conventional structures of lifelong learning.

2024

Our series, in 2024, *Backwards Travellers, looking Forwards: learning from the past to inform our future* has a specific focus on class, working class activism and culture. We have begun to reflect on cultural, spiritual, political, working class histories of education, with a view to learning from the past to inform our future. The first event, in April, launched Sharon's new book: - *Sir George Trevelyan, Residential Adult Education and the New Age: 'To Open the Immortal Eye'* published, in 2023, by Palgrave Macmillan.

The second seminar, on July 5th, was in three parts. In '*Voice, Memory and Storytelling: the place of Imagination in Adult Education',* Sharon met with Professor Liz Hoult and, through their poetry and other forms of writing, focussed on the role of the imagination in the education of adults and its centrality in helping us to re-imagine our futures. The event combined this conversation with a presentation by Professor Tom Woodin on *Listening in adult education: A useable past?*

Tom considered the neglect of EP Thompson and Raymond Williams' role in workers' education and extramural commitments and examples, from their work, to think about how a 'useable past' might contribute to processes of listening and learning today and as part of a potential renewal in adult education. In an open discussion, we asked how these tensions between a loss of policy memory, and spaces for creative re-imagining of our futures, may relate to our third event, in October, on adult education, lifelong learning and The Fortieth Anniversary of The Miner's Strike.