

POST-EDUCATION SOCIETY

Recognising Adults as Learners

Norman Evans

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
ADULT EDUCATION



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NORMAN EVANS

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Post~Education Society

RECOGNISING ADULTS AS LEARNERS

Norman Evans



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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this series is to provide a forum of discussion for the whole field of adult and continuing education. With increasing pressure on traditional areas of secondary and higher education and changing employment patterns, there is a growing awareness that the continuing education of adults has a vital role to play in our society. All the books in the series are about radical thinking and practice in education in Britain and abroad. The authors are concerned with education in its widest sense, and, by implication, with the inadequacy of traditional views of education as a process which concerns only the young and which takes place only in the formal sectors.

A major focus of the series is on the consequences of social change and the need to formulate an educational response to new technologies and new economic, social and political conditions as they affect *all* members of our society. The growth and distribution of knowledge is rapidly making traditional models of education obsolete, and new learning technologies are being developed which give greater potential than ever before to the possibilities of education as an instrument of social change, but only if we change radically our conceptions of education itself and adopt a critical view of the uses to which it could be put.

At the same time that educational ideals become more attainable through the growth of knowledge and learning technologies, economic, social, political, sexual and racial conflicts remain undiminished, and often find expression in educational inequalities and injustices. The series aims to explore this paradox, to identify obstacles in the way of realising the full potential of education for all, and to describe some of the initiatives being taken in the United Kingdom and abroad to try to overcome them.

Chapter 4, *Post-education Society*, signals changes for education as Chapter 1, *Post-industrial Society*, tells of structural changes in the world of employment. Norman Evans urges that we need to do for ourselves what the nineteenth century did for itself: re-think and re-jig our education arrangements to take account of what is happening to the country and its people. The price, then as now, is being prepared to scrap what no longer seems to work, and risk attempting things which

might work, even though there can be no guarantee that they will. It means shaking off the inertia of past success.

Concentrating primarily on adult learners, the book argues that to make sense, any attempt to improve things must take account of what we now know about adult growth and development, accepting as an operational imperative that it is as problematic and turbulent as adolescence and childhood. Having explored some of the implications of adulthood for adult learners, the book claims that since adults flourish to the extent that they have a sense of personal recognition and being valued, the business of education is to enable people to gain that sense of being recognised and valued through any learning they undertake. Recognition should be its watchword. An adult society would see that education did just that. If it did, there might be some chance of counteracting some of the more harmful effects of people working in situations which give them little satisfaction, let alone any sense of being valued. Just as important, it might be helpful to people who are having to plan new kinds of futures, as unemployment, redundancy and the need for re-training overtake them.

What needs to be done for the benefit of adult learners? Institutions need to learn to think of themselves as resources for learning rather than distributors of learning. They need to re-order their ways so that answers to what adults want to learn, how they want to learn it and when they want to learn it, become the basis for how they use their resources. This means developing facilities for people to study occasionally, or regularly, as it suits them, for accumulating academic credit if they want to from courses taken at different times in different institutions. Above all, it means being prepared to recognise the validity of learning which may have been acquired from work and life experience, from private reading, from television, radio, magazines, from do-it-yourself activities, from friends, from microcomputers, from anywhere in addition to classrooms, provided it meets required academic criteria. This amounts to putting initiatives and power in the hands of learners, correspondingly reducing the power exercised by institutions over learning. In the light of available knowledge of adult growth and development, the case is that this shift of the balance between individuals and institutions does no more than acknowledge what it means to be an adult in the late twentieth century. It goes on to suggest that putting adults in charge of their own learning is the logical extension of establishing a public education system, and so is a necessary step towards our society becoming a democracy of learners.

This important, visionary and controversial book marks a watershed in the literature on adult and continuing education.

Jo Campling
Series Editor



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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When a letter came asking, in effect, 'Please can we have your next book?' I did not know what it would be. The invitation came shortly after *The Knowledge Revolution* had been published, and friendly readers were wanting me to take the argument further. And I had just read *The Modern American College*. For me it was, and is, seminal. I began to hear myself using it in discussions about schemes for developing the theory and practice of the assessment of experiential learning in Great Britain, and realised that it was a touchstone for my thinking and planning. Its case is an elaborated research-based thesis that we can only learn what fits our stage of development, which the various authors apply to the subject disciplines and fields of study currently offered in higher education, to ways of learning, to ways of teaching, and to the contexts in which learning can best be promoted. So the theme for this book emerged — recognition of persons and their learning as the main engine of learning. The book is offered as a contribution to the debate, ever more anxious, about what the education system ought to be doing, and what account it ought to be taking of what others are doing, to facilitate people's learning in the late 1980s, 1990s and beyond.

It could not have been written without the benefit of frequent conversations with Morris Keeton, President of the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning, Columbia, Maryland, Arthur Chickering, Distinguished Professor of Higher Education, Memphis State University, and John Strange, Founding Dean of the College of Community and Public Service in the University of Massachusetts. The encouragement of Sir Charles Carter, first Vice-Chancellor of Lancaster University and Chairman of the Research Committee of the Policy Studies Institute, Dr Edwin Kerr, Chief Officer of the Council for National Academic Awards, and Jack Mansell, Director of the Further Education Unit, in attempting to devise valid and reliable procedures for the assessment of experiential learning, has been crucial. The academic staff working with me to evolve these procedures have helped more than they know, as we have talked about their work in Goldsmiths' College of the University of London and Thames Polytechnic, a scheme made possible by a grant from the Wates Foundation, in Hillcroft College and in a widening circle of lecturers in universities,

colleges and polytechnics, particularly in the Inner London Education Authority. So has Edgar Wille, Head of Management Development for the National Coal Board, as we have planned to use the assessment of experiential learning as a fresh approach to co-operation between employer and education institution. I am especially indebted to John Hurley, Head of the School of Staff Development in the National Institute of Higher Education, Dublin, for permission to draw on his work in Chapter 3.

To a considerable extent I have been stimulated by the transatlantic experience facilitated by the W.H. Kellogg Foundation through the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning in the USA and the Policy Studies Institute in London to assist development work in this field in Great Britain. To each and all I am variously grateful.

In recording that gratitude, I also want to celebrate adults as learners. Those I acknowledge helped me learn; none of them tried to teach me. And that is my theme — let us concentrate on learning, facilitate it, support it, recognise it and develop it; let teachers and institutions take their cue from adult learners.

Adult learners are men and women. They all bring uniquely varied work and life experience to any new learning. So when I have written 'he', understand 'she', and vice versa.

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1 POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

'Post-industrial society' is a slogan. It says things are not what they were. It is an indication of the state of things; it is not a description of them. And it is not a description because it is extremely difficult to describe where things are. But it is a useful slogan.

Part of the message the slogan carries is that what people do to earn their living is changing. Twice as many people work in providing services as in manufacturing and productive industry, which was and is the hallmark of an industrial society. Those employed in mining and quarrying number only a quarter of those in banking, insurance and finance. One consequence is that more people have more scope in their employment for thinking of themselves as persons; fewer have the daily experience of being subordinated to the dictates of industrial production in factories. And those who do have that experience have heard the message and their voices are raised, for they too need recognition as persons. Whatever the post-industrial society describes, in part it refers to the shift from process to persons as a characteristic of paid work and employment. So post-industrial society serves as a metaphor for fundamental changes in employment and the working lives of men and women.

The late 1980s are revealing what some of those changes mean. There is a daily commentary on unemployment, inflation, wage disputes, price increases, and gloomy prophecies that things are going to get worse. There is what seems like a daily contradiction of all that as people go on spending money on cars, on holidays abroad, on drink and cigarettes, apparently unaffected by the stories that they are worse off than before. Figures for unemployment and figures for spending look as if they come from different constellations. And yet this is the story in Western societies both sides of the Atlantic, in the United States just as in countries in continental Europe and in Great Britain. It is confusing and disturbing for people.

Confusion about Education

This continual experience of economic uncertainty has a profound