Where Have We Got To? Stories of Survival, Resistance and Retreat in Sustaining Commitment to Social Purpose in Adult Education

Paul Armstrong
University of Leeds

Abstract: As part of a larger study seeking to understand the social, political and cultural values of those who began teaching adult education between 1975 and 1985, this focuses on those adult educators from North America and the UK who took part in an Exchange program between 1984 and 1988.

'I grew up with the notion of myself as an artist, and I also felt I had strong obligations. I worked my art, to the degree that I could, into my social realities. Yet as I became more involved with participatory research and became more explicit about looking at politics and economic realities as part of a cultural context, I think I began to understand what I was doing intuitively and to recognise that it was resistance, a very important kind of resistance.'
dian marino (1997, 3)

Purpose of Study

As part of a larger study that is seeking to understand the social, political and cultural values of those who began teaching in adult education between 1975 and 1985, this study focuses on a core of adult educators from North America and the United Kingdom who took part in an Exchange program sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation between 1984 and 1988. The scheme, largely the product of the enthusiasm and commitment of Phyllis Cunningham, was intended to bring together those described as 'young professors' (not necessarily in terms of age, but length of time in the field) from US, Canada and the UK, to consider the global commitments of university adult education towards issues of democracy, social justice and world peace. Some twenty years on, it is timely to review what influence or impact this initiative has had in terms of making progress towards these goals at a conference that brings together two of the three adult education organisations involved.

The question 'where have they got to?' is deliberately ambiguous. Taken literally it refers to the need to find out where the 21 people who took part in the Exchange programme are today, and how they are positioned with respect to social purpose.   Just over a decade after the first Exchange, two of the participants, Nod Miller and Miriam Zukas (1995) took stock of where we were. They reported that four had moved out of the field of adult education. Now, four of those remaining are known to have retired early from academic life. And one, sadly, died in January 1993, and to whom this paper is dedicated. Although I only met dian marino once as part of the Kellogg Exchange, I know that she had a significant impact on the way I re-framed my praxis as an adult educator.

The second meaning of the question is about identity location and its relation to practice of teaching and research; it is about changing aspirations, expectations, values and commitment. The world in 1984 was quite a different place, and yet, paradoxically, it is much the same. As I write this paper, my university is debating the closure of the School of Continuing Education in which I work; and it is one of very few left in the United Kingdom. In 1984, there were some 37 centres, departments or schools variously labelled 'adult education', 'continuing education', 'extra-mural studies', 'extension studies', in UK universities. Today, very few of these still

continue to exist as they were in 1984 (except perhaps in Scotland and Wales), and yet paradoxically as they shrunk or closed, the discourse of 'lifelong learning' grew. Largely due to the introduction of new universities, new systems of subject-based research assessment, the traditional CE department was divided between subject-based research (in history, literature, art, etc) and education research. Within universities, CE research had to be located in an appropriate internal department, if it was to attract research funding.

The impact of these organisational changes around disciplinary-based teaching and research had important implications for the subject identity of the adult educator. The arguments around the distinctiveness of adult learning became hard to sustain in a context where the rhetoric of lifelong learning had been introduced to encompass not only informal learning, but pre-school education through vocational training and professional development, including work-based learning. These developments are not peculiar to the UK.

Changing times, changing contexts

The important backcloth to this analysis is the political and economic context. On my first visit to the USA as part of the Exchange scheme in November 1984, I was able to experience firsthand a presidential election, joining in a Mondale Democrat campaign in New York City, and the 'celebrations' of a Reagan Republican re-election victory at AAACE in Lousville. In Britain there had been a rightwing government under Britain's first woman prime minister, Margaret Thatcher since 1979, whose Conservative Party was to provide 18 years of continuous rule winning further elections in 1983, 1987 and 1992 (under John Major), before Blair's 'new' Labour eventually came to power in 1997. A similar shift from left to right and back to left had taken place in Canada, from Clark's short-lived minority Conservative government in 1979-80, back to Trudeau, followed by a period of Conservative rule from 1984 to 1993, ending a very brief period of office for Canada's first female prime minister, Kim Campbell, before Mulroney shifted policies back toward the centre. In the UK, the extended period of right-wing rule from 1979 to 1997 enabled the Conservatives to radically reform all parts of the educational system, including higher education, and within that adult education. The ideological shift was heavily determined by a free-market, laissez-faire, neo-liberal economic model, that was to re-orient education as a public service in uncomfortable ways.

Interestingly these developments were accompanied by significant changes in social and educational theory which were providing academic adult education researchers different lenses with which to interpret what was going on in the world. In 1984, the discourse of Marxist critique was still evident, if not more so, due to the explicit social control strategies of the right-wing governments, who were silencing the voice of the unions and collective solidarity through the promotion of individualism and competitiveness, and the polarisation of the powerful and the powerless. Indeed, some of us at that time were optimistic that Marx's prediction about the inevitability of capitalism sowing the seeds of its own destruction was about to be realized. However, with trade unions' power reduced, and the increase in individual competitiveness and rational goal-seeking ambition, the reliance on the Marxist grand narrative was to be undermined. Indeed, any socialist ideas and values were to be severely tested by the challenges of postmodernism. Since then, social and economic theory has taken a number of 'turns'.

The rejection of economic determinism has not contributed to transformation to a more equitable world. Social justice is still to be achieved. The oppression of the powerless is more subtle, and exploitation of labour power has been distorted by globalising influences, which encourage us to 'celebrate diversity' and to acknowledge difference. The fragmentation of the personal and the political has confused and made theoretical analyses more complex, where

contradictions continue to be subject to scrutiny through rational discourse. And whilst this disturbs and transforms the surface of the social and cultural milieu at the beginning of the 21st century, the dominance of ideologies rooted in a particular economic mode of production persists. Shifts in discourse may reflect changing priorities within a particular economic and ideological frame that has retained deep structural inequalities in the interests of capital.

Telling stories

How did adult educators survive this shift towards the right, particularly towards right-wing economic policies and discourses?   Miller and Zukas (1995) had already observed that the economist language and metaphors heard in the USA which were strange to the British ear in 1984, were by 1995 commonplace. The impact of globalisation was very evident. One of the participants in Miller and Zukas's study referred to the differences in awareness of political ideologies in the USA and the UK. Now this difference is understood as consensus politics in the UK. In looking at the participants' stories there are a number of themes to emerge. In this brief paper, illustrations of three themes will be presented.

Reflecting dominant ideologies: individualistic accounts as retreat

The first theme represents a kind of retreatism. This has echoes of one of Merton's (1968) five types of adaption, where retreatism is used as non-acceptance of dominant goals and means. Outside this functionalist model, the notion has some currency in talking about non-students (though not necessarily non-learners) as disaffected. This theme represents those that have an over-individualistic view of structural events. One of the participants in the Exchange (who I will call J) was working in adult education at the time, which he found very stimulating. Without any training, and with very limited previous experience of teaching, either pre-service or in-service, he was offered a full-time post teaching in university adult education in 1981. He was given the space and time to develop which he enjoyed, and did not feel under any pressure. At the same time was researching for his doctorate, which enabled him to apply his disciplinary perspective to a cohort of adult learners. He also had time to edit a book that emerged from his experiences in the Exchange, even though he recalls having 'feelings of inadequacy' when meeting with international colleagues. In the early 1990s, his university CE department was closed down, and he was transferred to an academic post in a school of education, where most of the students he taught were mostly school teachers undertaking professional development rather than to access higher education. The teaching commitment imposed upon him in his new location meant that he had to give up teaching his subject discipline; instead he was required to focus on teaching postgraduate research methodology. Other organisational changes were taking place in his institution, including the introduction of a workload model. Recognising that he was never very confident in his teaching and research, he over-compensated by working very hard, though not necessarily very productively. Within three years he had a heart attack, and was later to take early retirement when it was offered. This he attributes to the organisational change and to his new post:

> I just got very tired. There were that many switches and changes, trying to be everything to everyone, and trying to find enough things to give my job some validity, because we had this workload model. You got your workload rating, and the idea was if that was low you were targeted for training, but I never got any training. You were just left on your own. I remember saying to my line manager … I was doing a 70-hour week, I was taking work home. I told him and he told his boss, who said he would talk to my line manager about this, as it was not appropriate, and not healthy. But absolutely nothing was done. It was not

just me. My colleagues seemed to be working just as hard – I don't know if they were doing as many as 70 hours as me, but I think there were a lot of people under pressure, and at least two of them in the department had had heart attacks – they were put under pressure. I think what happened right at the very end, I was very tired, and my enjoyment of teaching, of researching for teaching went. I lost interest. I could not teach my subject discipline any more, and was being asked to get into new areas which I wasn't particularly interested in. And when I did the students dried up, and so did the module I'd worked hard to get going. The research methods was really a last stand, and I think that's why I took the decision to retire early. And now I just don't want to read anything academic. And I am not interested in academe or anything intellectual at all.

What is very interesting about this story is the account J gives as to why this happened. There was virtually no analysis of the wider political and economic context. In attributing blame, which J was willing to do, he first and foremost blamed himself, his own inadequacies and lack of confidence, even though there are, as he himself agreed, indicators of academic success (two first-class honors degrees, a Ph.D, an initially successful teaching career, several publications including an edited book). When this was probed, he was clearly disappointed that the effort that he put into publication was not reflected by the judgement of his peers on the quality of his academic research. To have his research dismissed publicly was humiliating. His reaction was to work harder, withdrawing almost entirely from view. By now he was prepared to blame other individuals, his line manager and the dean of the faculty. At no point did J refer to what was going on in the political and economic world beyond the university. And at this time, he had distanced himself from adult education; he was uncomfortable with political economy analyses as such perspectives did not accord with his world view. He has clearly drawn to a personal and private view, rather than the public and political.

An Important Kind of Resistance

In contrast, dian marino was an advocate of risk-taking. Because her story best represents resistance among those who participated in the Exchange, I shall take a risk here of constructing her story from the legacy of written work that she has left. On being identified as having cancer, dian could have been forgiven for retreating from the world. As a critical educator, she wanted to resist being disempowered by the disease. Rather than seeing herself at war with cancer, she wanted to develop resistance as she would in her social and political action:

We do need a language of resistance in our struggles with chronic illness, but it needs to be a language free of militarism. I found it wonderfully healing to spend quiet time in nature – a form of resistance perhaps hardly a battle. Even supposedly alternative language can be infuriating. The 'new age' philosophy of illness is a good example. At first, I would go out and buy these latest self-help books only to find the basic message was 'You made yourself sick so you can heal yourself'. So simple but so damaging. It fits tall too well with mass media messages that bombard us daily: problems are individual, not social. We're kept disorganised with a simplistic presentation of blame and responsibility' (marino, 1997, 147)

The notion of resistance that influenced dian was derived, in part, from her reading of Gramsci. Working in a North American context where research on learning and education was framed as neutral, dian believed that it was important to challenge this hegemony and the consensus it constructs, through resistance - to refuse to consent to the dominant ideologies that

are imposed upon us. This is not a passive form of resistance, for we must have our voices heard, we must 'speak out'. The recognition of contradiction was crucial for dian, and reflected the climate in which she worked in higher education. It was difficult to sustain these commitments when value placed on learning in higher education was decreasing. dian held the firm view that 'we cannot *not* learn' but neither 'can we teach our students to be challenging and self-critical, socially critical, if we aren't struggling to get better at doing that ourselves' (marino, 1997, 43). Yet, the paradox is that 'teaching in universities is relegated to the least valued category of how academics are evaluated'.   She went on to say

> *What has been traditionally important is research, which from my point of view*
> *affects point-zero-zero-one per cent of folk, and this is why it is so wonderfully*
> *embraced by those in power. If you did an energy analysis of research in most*
> *university departments, and of its relationship to altered relations in our everyday*
> *world, you would see that its impact is low or that it is what we call, to use*
> *technological jargon, 'inefficient'.* (marino, 1997, 44)

One of the reasons why dian did not feel very comfortable working in a university setting was precisely because of its suppression of political discourse. 'Years of internalizing 'education is neutral' has left its mark' (marino, 1997, 124), and this make the location of one's own position complicated: 'it is almost outside our thought patterns to imagine teachers or leaders who have both positions and are open. If you are a teacher, to take a position means that you are closed. The assumption is that education ought to be neutral, and that neutral is not a political position, which of course it is. It is maintaining political position: it keeps power relations exactly the way they are.' (marino, 1997, 125)

We will never know whether dian would have been able to sustain her position in academe as it developed through the last decade of the last century, but her story is important, it is optimistic, and reminds us that we need a language of resistance, 'but we also need to imagine change, we need languages of transformation' (marino, 1997, 128).

Cultural Construction of Narratives: Survival Stories

In the late 1970s, the 'optimism and joyful irreverence' of the sixties (Fieldhouse, 1993) was beginning to fade. With a significant swing towards a more 'radical' right, university provision of adult education was entering a new era, which was to change irrevocably. It was not simply a matter of whether the change was better or worse, for we were coming increasingly aware of contradictions. The period 1979 to 1997 for me personally was a struggle. As I taught, I learned, and the more I learned, the more complicated the world became. My identity as an adult educator strengthened, as I ceased to think of myself as a sociologist. There was a period within these 18 years when I left higher education to work elsewhere in public sector education. Yet, I still maintained contact with higher education, for I was optimistic that its historic role would continue to provide space for critical thinking, theorising and praxis.

During this time I also sustained contact with my adult education networks including SCUTREA and AERC, and particularly some of those who had been key players in the Exchange. Nod Miller and Miriam Zukas (1995) have commented on the significance of friendship and networking that emerged from the Exchange, and this was important for sustaining optimism. In 1997 at SCUTREA in London, we added a postscript to the introduction to the conference proceedings:

> … although Paul and Nod have attended SCUTREA conferences since 1979, and
> Miriam since 1981, this is the first time they had experience of participating
> together in a conference in a Britain governed by the Labour Party. It is probably

no accident that the only way Labour as succeeded in taking power is by crossing borders and blurring boundaries [the conference theme]. Our first indications are that this government will prove to be more amenable to adult education, to lifelong learning, and to global relationships' (Armstrong, Miller and Zukas, 1997, xiii).

In spite of the rhetoric around lifelong learning, such guarded optimism now appears misplaced. I indicated at the beginning of the paper that the department I work in is threatened with closure. During its writing, democratic forces have at least staved off the day of execution for the time being. In the meantime, I shall continue with this research to understand the nature of survival, and to uncover new strategies of resistance. It is not yet time to retreat.

References

Armstrong, Paul, Miller, Nod and Zukas, Miriam (eds) (1997) *Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries: Research in the Education of Adults. Proceedings of the 27th Annual SCUTREA Conference.* London: Birkbeck College/SCUTREA

Fieldhouse, Roger (1993) *Optimism and Joyful Irreverence*. Leicester: NIACE

marino, dian (1997) *Wild Garden: Art, Education and the Culture of Resistance*. Toronto: Between the Lines

Merton, Robert K. (1968) *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press

Miller, Nod and Zukas, Miriam (1995) 'Exchanging places, trading learning: the impact of cross-cultural visiting on personal and professional development' in Ian Bryant (ed) *Vision, Invention, Intervention: Celebrating Adult Education. Proceedings of the 25th Annual SCUTREA Conference*. Southampton: University of Southampton/SCUTREA.