



Eating, drinking and adult learning – a letter from England

by Alan Tuckett

Adult Learning Commentary, Number 11, 24 May 2000

This weekend a group of adult educators from Australia, South Africa, Uruguay, Jamaica and a clutch of European countries, backed by staff from UNESCO's adult education institute, have been at NIACE in England, wrestling with the following question. What kind of document would be helpful in support of the first International Adult Learners Week, which will be launched at EXPO 2000 in Hanover, Germany on 8 September?

We all agreed that there is no prescription or formula for success – other than that there is no paradigm. We agreed too, that we did not want to produce a guide, but to capture conversations and experiences of how people have explored using a festival to highlight adults' learning experience in literacy, and in lifelong learning more widely.

Still, as soon as we said that, Joe Samuels from South Africa argued that there needed to be celebration, eating, drinking and fun. They at least transcend cultural boundaries. So too does the power of good storytelling, and the effect of existing students on other people's motivation to learn.

As the weekend rolled on, there was a sharp sense of common goals shining through different practices – the literacy bus that toured the communities of Benin for a month in the run up to International Literacy Day performed a comparable function to the learning train that travelled across Russia last September. Not quite the same as the pensioners water-skiing on the River Mersey as part of Liverpool's Growing Old Disgracefully campaign, the Swiss one hour a day learning tram, or the church service that launches Jamaica's Adult Education Week. All

shared the displacement of adult learning from private and invisible spaces to public and visible ones.

Everyone agreed that visual images were important, but few had such an eye for design as the Australian campaign, with its coordinated images on posters, pamphlets and television programs. Our financial circumstances were different, and we debated long and hard about how much needs to be planned, how far a Week or festival should be top-down with state support, and how far it should grow bottom up.

We were all pleased to have UNESCO's endorsement of Adult Learners Week as an enrichment of International Literacy Day – yet we wanted to nurture the practice of mutual visits, shared experiences, and the evolution of activities fit for the purposes of new participants. We recognised that whilst Adult Learners Week is more than a Eurocentric or Anglophone initiative, it had not yet succeeded in firing the imagination of many in the south.

The results of our discussions are posted on the International Adult Learners Week email group hosted by Adult Learning Australia, which represents the beginning of a global dialogue on these issues. Educational innovations are notoriously difficult to transfer from one context to another. But there are now 30 or more countries organising weeks, days or festivals to promote lifelong learning in this way. The weekend gave way to the UK's Adult Learners Week and our politicians' speeches reminded me how much we have borrowed of Keating's 'clever country' policies... and we don't have an election until next year.