



Photo: Sue Parkins

Still out of reach

Practitioners used to pray for the kind of attention adult learning now receives from government but much more will be needed to reach those who still do not think learning is for them, writes **SUE MEYER**

I started my present career as head of a small adult education 'centre' covering 10 small villages in rural Norfolk. I have seldom had more fun than in this personal crusade which, despite my admittedly amateurish approach, produced some great opportunities for both students and tutors. Rules were bent. We may have had only six learners producing projects in our stained glass class, but what projects – a glittering feast reflected in the eyes of the learners. The airbase maths group was a different kind of triumph. Eleven women from the married quarters slogged away all winter in a room overlooking miles of flat turf but emerged in August with a magic pass slip each and a view of very different horizons.

There have been some formidable changes. I've seen the birth of two national funding bodies, the death of one and the proposed demise of another to be followed by a third birth. Where quality used to mean that most of the students stayed or passed there is now a whole industry checking that things are done according to the best possible systems. The key change has been that government cares about adult learning now and has a developed focus on it. When I started work in this field we used to pray for such interest and lament the lack of attention given to our work. I might be tempted to echo the adage that you should be careful what you pray for but I think that on balance the gains have been greater than the losses.

We have, after all, seen huge strides in the provision of literacy and numeracy both in the quantity of provision and the quality. If people have been failed by a system they need to be guaranteed a better deal second time around – a rickety system supported by volunteering has been replaced by a substantial professional infrastructure. The Government has also come to understand that most learning takes place at work and that only by being alongside employers can we hope to reach the many people that stopped learning to get a job. That stark choice was a feature of the world now replaced by a knowledge- and service-based society where constant learning is the key to success.

But not everything in the garden is rosy. The Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning is right to point to the loss of opportunities for ordinary people who want to learn for their own purposes in their own time, whether for work or pleasure. The Government is consulting on this with an expressed intention of

developing a stronger place for self-organised opportunities in a state-funded system, more technology and a re-evaluation of traditional class provision. My views on this are mixed and based not only on professional experience but also on a sabbatical last autumn during which I became a mystery shopper on a range of adult education activities.

In essence I say 'yes' to making sure that knowledge about learning in the voluntary and private sector is readily available both in localities and on the web. It isn't at present and that makes finding opportunities hard, and doubly hard if you aren't familiar with the system. Anyone who has had to grapple with the multiple brochures and inadequate targeting of marketing material in this sector would, like me, be crying out for a better way to make learning attractive. I would say 'yes' too to encouraging voluntary and private groups to locate their opportunities in public spaces and helping public buildings to accommodate them. I would support the freeing from bureaucracy of classes where people can vote with their feet and demand a refund if provision is poor.

However, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. The University of the Third Age is a great organisation but it isn't an outreach service for poor older people, or the guarantor of any range of opportunities. The private art class will not relocate to a sink estate even for the sake of a bit of public funding and, to be honest, the real benefits of technology in learning come from the possibility of using it whenever you want at home rather than being constrained by when you can get access to a computer at the library.

To competently address a certain range of needs public provision is vital. To reach those who have least and don't believe that learning is for them needs strong outreach services. To give them the best possible learning experience when they put their toe in the water requires guaranteed high-quality teaching. To help them move forward in learning requires guidance as well as information. None of this is cheap. However, such provision could provide a base on which can be built a universal system funded by fees and predicated on successful partnership. Without this foundation the Government is building a castle in the air.

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