



Photo: Sue Parkins

Back to the future

This year NIACE celebrates 90 years of supporting adult learning. Reflecting on its early history reminds us that, no matter what the social and political context, adult education can be a force for good for individuals, businesses and society more generally, writes **PETER LAVENDER**

NIACE is 90 years old this year. At this age it must be a time for celebration, for looking back over 90 years, and for reappraising the place of adult education. In his old age the great Japanese artist sometimes known as Hokusai said:

From around the age of six, I had the habit of sketching from life. I became an artist, and from 50 on began producing works that won some reputation, but nothing I did before the age of 70 was worthy of attention. At 73, I began to grasp the structures of birds and beasts, insects and fish, and of the way plants grow. If I go on trying, I will surely understand them still better by the time I am 86, so that by 90 I will have penetrated to their essential nature. At 100, I may well have a positively divine understanding of them, while at 130, 140 or more I will have reached the stage where every dot and every stroke I paint will be alive.

Hokusai died at 89, saying: 'If only Heaven will give me just another ten years ... just another five more years, then I could become a real painter'.

To have such determination is an extraordinary thing. And what this says about learning is important too. I can think of no more inspiring activity than meeting people who have such a determination in relation to learning. That's why Adult Learners' Week – in its twentieth year this year – offers wonderful opportunities for all education and training providers to encourage others to join in. And enlarging the numbers of those who learn is NIACE's aim, just as it was the aim of the British Institute of Adult Education in 1921.

But being 90 means looking back too. The founders of the British Institute of Adult Education intended the organisation to be, as Lord Haldane said, 'a centre for common thought by persons of varied experience in the adult education movement'. They numbered Albert Mansbridge, founder of the Workers' Educational Association, who chaired the first meeting of the BIAE, and Lord Haldane, its first president. Key figures in the Ministry of Reconstruction's 1919 Report on Adult Education were also involved, such as the social historian R.H. Tawney. They set out to put adult education where it belonged – a bridge between universities and industry, with a centre 'in every community' and as 'universal as citizenship'. The report suggested there be wide access to mass, lifelong higher education and continuing professional development. Most significantly the 1919 report saw adult education as central to the health of democratic societies, as a 'permanent national necessity', and part of the educational system.

At the inaugural meeting of the BIAE in January 1921 there were between 60 and 70 members. By the fourth meeting in September

there were 267 members. The Institute acted as a pressure group and national forum for adult education, providing support to the WEA, to the 'World Association' (which prefigured the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE)), and to the Educational Settlements. In the earliest days it followed the interests of its founders: adult education in rural areas; adult education for fishermen; adult education among women; broadcasting and adult education.

The year 1921 was significant for many other reasons too. Impoverished by the Great War, Europe struggled to deal with its debts, and in several cities there were riots because of food prices. Albert Einstein received the Nobel prize for physics. 1921 saw the foundation of the Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Czech and Chinese Communist Parties. There were invasions, assassinations, wars and genocides. The rise of fascism was evident of course - Hitler became leader of the Nazi Party, and the Italian National Fascist Party was formed. Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State were created too, with a truce and a peace conference. In Britain, miners, rail and transport workers called for a strike, and there was a general strike in Norway. David Lloyd George continued to lead a coalition government as Prime Minister. In the midst of all this the BIAE was created and before long had wriggled free from the World Association to become independent.

So, in the midst of a deep recession and another coalition government, we look back over 90 years. We will continue doing this through the year. What are the lessons we can learn from 1921? I think there are three. First, that out of disaster we can build something good if only we can work together and there are enough people willing to meet to do it. New forms of support for learning opportunity will be created. Second, that adult education has a central role in encouraging good citizenship, which is critical to the health of democratic societies. A focus on those with fewest opportunities was present in 1921 and is with us still. Third, that no matter what the social and political contexts, adult education can be a force for good for individuals, companies and society more generally. That's why it must be a central part of the education system and not an 'optional extra'. As we contemplate NIACE's purpose in 2011 perhaps we should note that it is still about policy impact, quality improvement and driving up participation – particularly of those with most disadvantage. This ninetieth birthday is also an opportunity to celebrate new learning in later years – I like to think that Hokusai would have felt at home here. Ninety years is a long history and a noble one. Many of us feel privileged to be part of it and long may it continue.

Peter Lavender is NIACE's Deputy Chief Executive