



In response to a recent report linking alcohol with cancer, one popular broadcaster commented: 'In that case, I'd better stick to drinking the wine I bought last week – as it was good for me then'.

It is no wonder we are becoming more cynical in the way we view research findings. We are constantly bombarded by the media with apparently conflicting reports and guidance. It is often the way findings are presented, rather than the research itself, which leads to confusion. Whatever the cause, a general culture of scepticism can be damaging (as recent polls on climate change attest). When distrust replaces critical assessment, it can also be an obstacle to the development of evidence-based policy.

There is a strong body of research on the social and personal benefits of learning. Adult learning is linked to active ageing, improved health and wellbeing, increased social cohesion and citizenship, and reduced crime. Encouragingly, some of these findings are now being recognised in policy documents, such as the recent *Delivering Community Learning for Wales*. However, we are still a long way short of a cross-department approach to exploiting the true public value of learning – in England and in Wales.

More research will no doubt help further build the case for adult learning, particularly when it is expertly presented as in *Learning Through Life*, the main report of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning. However, stories can also play an important role in winning hearts and minds – and when personal reflection supports and illuminates quantitative findings you have a powerful force for change.

We've seen this with previous winners of NIACE's prestigious learner awards and their inspiring accounts of the impact learning has had on their lives and the challenges it has helped them overcome. Daliah Colwell, when receiving her award for FE Learner of the Year, noted: 'If I hadn't come back to college when I did, I think by now I'd probably have ended up in prison'. Senior Learner of the Year Sybil Coleman said: 'Without these classes, none of us would be here. It wouldn't be possible. We'd be housebound'. One of the most pointed conclusions was given by Chris Phillips, former alcoholic and winner of the Edexcel Learner of the Year, who simply said: 'If I hadn't come back to college, I'd probably be dead by now'.

These personal accounts illustrate the public value of learning and support research findings that demonstrate that expenditure on education is an investment which can lead to savings in other areas.

This year's Adult Learners' Week will again be a showcase of the transformational impact that learning can have on people's lives.

Many of us will have the pleasure of meeting some truly inspirational individuals who have overcome hurdles and personal challenges, shown resilience and determination, and achieved great successes. Although their stories are individual and diverse, their common thread is often the gaining of a new sense of purpose and confidence. From applying for a job after many years on benefits to helping children with their homework for the first time, from being able to communicate with others to going on to complete a PhD – the effect of their new-found self-belief is tangible and positive. This is no more evident than in the experience of Lutala Kabe, who was a successful business woman in her home country of the Congo until war broke out. After witnessing the murder of family and friends, and suffering violence and torture herself, Lutala managed to flee to the UK. 'I came to Britain as a refugee,' she says. 'I had no money and I could not speak English. Adult learning helped me to find a new life and face the future with hope.' Lutala was awarded the NIACE Dysgu Cymru ESOL Learner of the Year in 2010 and has since gone on to inspire countless others and advocate for the protection of funding for adult learning.

Stories help us understand the world. The fields of psychology and neurology both confirm that human beings think in narrative structures. Concepts relayed in story form imprint themselves into our minds more than ideas explained with logic and analysis. This extends to politicians and policymakers, as we have seen when Vince Cable describes how adult learning helped his mother recover from depression, or when John Griffiths (former Welsh Assembly Government Deputy Minister for Skills) describes with passion how he took up learning as an adult through the Workers' Educational Association, and went on to become a solicitor.

The added reach of stories, of course, is that they can inspire other individuals who may face similar circumstances. Indeed, a study undertaken by NIACE Dysgu Cymru in 2009 showed that talking to others, sharing experiences and learner stories were the most effective mechanisms to trigger those who have not participated in many years to go back into learning.

You can hear some of our previous winners talk directly about their experiences by searching 'learner stories' at NIACE's website or by searching for 'NIACEDC' on YouTube. Some of the stories of this year's Adult Learners' Week award winners are set out in this edition of *Adults Learning*. Thousands more are yet to be told.

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The power of stories

Research can help build the case for adult learning, but when it is supported and illuminated by the inspiring stories of learners you have a powerful force for change, writes **RICHARD SPEAR**