Museums and Lifelong Learning: the Adult Dimension

Alan Chadwick

It is worth reminding ourselves that the notion of museums and adult education bodies co-operating together is not unfamiliar. Indeed, the two major Adult Education Reports this century, the Adult Education Committee Final Report (1919) and Adult Education: a plan for development, (1973), both considered the roles of museums and adult education providers. In the museums sector, the Report by Sir Henry Miers of 1928 and Sir Frank Markham's Report of 1938 also linked the two roles together, although in the case of the former Report the lack of co-operation between the two sectors was noted.

It was an American Association for Adult Education publication of 1934 that provided continuity by offering a brief review of adult education in British museums. In a short section dealing with the Workers Educational Association (WEA) it was noted that of sixty-five museums approached, only eleven reported co-operation with the Association, but considering the far-reaching scope and varied activities of that organisation it seems probable that considerably more work in connection with it passed unmentioned.

In 1956 the National Institute of Adult Education (as it was then called) published a report on the same theme. It also considered forms of cooperation and addressed the question of defining museums. As to definitions, the Museums Association, at its 1998 Annual General Meeting (AMG), indicated that museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.

Adult educators will relate to the notions of inspiration, learning and enjoyment as being implicit within at least one description of adult education, i.e. to assist adults reach their maximum learning potential through formal, non-formal and informal means. As to lifelong learning, I have employed a recent definition as being
the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their life-times, and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all their roles, circumstances and environments. These, taken together, are worthy and comprehensive enough as a basis for interactive engagement and thus, as a contribution to a learning society. The challenge is to translate rhetoric into reality. In this regard, the recent Government White Paper Learning to succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning makes a start by focusing on the young and older adult within the concept of lifelong learning, and the broad proposals provide a basis for setting a learning society in place.

Out of these proposals two themes central to the creation of partnerships for learning are selected here for discussion. These are adult learning and social exclusion.

The White Paper emphasises the importance of adult learning, not least the contribution which is thereby made to citizenship (a topic of major importance in the 1919 Report referred to above). In addition, wider values contained in, for example, the study of art, literature and music are acknowledged. There is in the document an unequivocal commitment to an inclusive approach to learning, not least the need to reduce barriers to participation for older adults. The notion of local learning partnerships (LLPs) is given strong approval. These bodies, some of which have already had a measure of success, are encouraged to extend participation and, thereby, engage the active attention of adult learners, community organisations and voluntary bodies alike.

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has responded warmly to the White Paper and, regarding the two themes cited earlier, felt that the cultural changes proposed could not be secured

... without the engagement of a wide range of local authority services - through housing departments in their support of the learning needs of tenants' groups; social services departments in their work with adults with learning difficulties and disabilities, and in their programmes of support for older people and of families; museums and libraries; economic development units; schools; and transport services. All have a part to play in creating the synergies necessary to contest social exclusion and promote a culture of learning.

... some museums are already making great strides, working with the homeless, the mentally ill, young offenders and other groups often thought least likely to figure in the museum visitor profile. Indeed, some in the museum world see tackling social exclusion as fundamental to their role ... (yet) the very fact that we find it straightforward to pinpoint isolated examples of good practice in this area suggests that, as yet, too few museums are doing anything, even if they accept the principle.

In this context, and with a view towards partnerships, NIACE notes that LLPs should be located within local government
... because of the need to recognise the contribution made to effective lifelong learning policy from other local agencies - libraries, museums ... among them." The concept of lifelong learning in the context of museums is hardly new. However, a timely boost, cross-referencing to the White Paper, has been given by the recent publication of two reports: firstly, a report by Professor Bob Fryer on lifelong learning who, in referring to museums, sees them «as part of a mosaic of local and national provision»; and secondly, a report by David Anderson, from the perspective of museum education, who notes the «energy, commitment and sense of purpose» of adult educators. It is a cause for regret that the former document gives relatively little emphasis to museums, when compared with libraries, for example.

By comparison, Anderson provides a more substantial discussion of museums and lifelong learning. In this context, the place of adult education is seen as one key element in the changes taking place within museums from being object-based to becoming culture-based institutions, and thereby re-positioning themselves as public learning centres.

So far so good, but as Sir Peter Newsom once observed at a NIACE Conference, «thought is free, but action runs the bills up». If, as suggested by NIACE, a «culture of learning» is to be secured, the notion of inter-agency collaboration becomes directly relevant in the perennial struggle to maintain and add to resources in order that new initiatives can be taken. Museums and adult education organisations are similar in kind and thus have a commensal relationship, i.e. living in partnership with each other for purposes of mutual benefit.

There are in the United Kingdom, year on year, examples cited of collaborative ventures which cover a wide spectrum of groups and activities. In this regard, a recent Museum Working Group has provided a set of informative case studies taken by the WEA, museums and other partners. One random example, drawn from another source, may serve to encapsulate recent trends and illustrate both the breadth of collaboration and also the types of beneficiaries involved.

During July 1999, the V&A hosted a Summer School for adult literacy students and refugees. The initiative was developed by the Museum through its Adult and Community Education section. The partners were the Kensington and Chelsea Adult College and the London Connection - a project for homeless people in Charing Cross, and with experience of working with refugees. Students from a number of countries gained language and literacy skills through talks, games, videos, worksheets and story-writing, among other activities. The recent Report by Sir Claus Moser to Government which highlights the extent of illiteracy in this country made this an opportune time to ground the concept of social inclusion and adult learning in reality through this event.

Examples such as this do, however, indicate a need for dissemination (as in the WEA example), and for on-going research. As already discussed, a major stimulus for the development of partnerships to tackle themes such as those described earlier is, as Newsom observed, the fiscal imperative. By addressing the issue
of inclusion, museums and adult education bodies combined should find their aspirations coinciding with Government's social policy initiatives and, arguably, also with the policies of other funding agencies. A recognition that self-interest provides the most honest (and prudent) basis for collaboration can better ensure that pooled expertise and material resources result in experiences with and for adult learners that are, at best, holistic and which may not have been available otherwise. This assumes, on the part of the initiators, preliminary considerations such as sharing a common purpose, and establishing effective means of communication, of being flexible, and accepting shared risks. On this point, it is worth remembering that we, too, are adult learners – not least regarding a need to understand the cultures of partner organisations, and the degree to which, therefore, «a common purpose» arises from shared philosophies, principles and policies.

Our ultimate partnership is with the public which, in one way or another, help to keep our organisations in being. Within the public exist many groupings, and it is an awareness of how these may be identified, consulted and engaged that will require a range of skills, qualities and approaches – not least skills associated with research; qualities that include sensitivity and patience; and approaches that recognise the importance of achieving balance and monitoring of provision and, subsequently, an evaluation of outcomes in which all participants share, given that the quality of provision should be directly proportional to the quality of the learning experience gained.

What, then, is becoming increasingly apparent nationally is the recognition of shared goals in addressing the most substantial part of the life-span within lifelong learning – the post-school sector. In general, adult learning has been peripheral in museums; museum learning has been peripheral in adult education. Part of finding and maintaining a common purpose should be to provide a basis for the peripheral to become central.

Assuming a willingness to collaborate, it is axiomatic that networks, and roles within them, become increasingly relevant, both as to their development, as already indicated, but also to their maintenance, with the accompanying implications for how time is budgeted to attend to these requirements. Yet, in the pooling of resources, both lay people such as community leaders, and professionals from other sectors may begin to play a significant and complementary role, operating both within and/or on behalf of the principal contributors in a variety of roles.

It is certainly the case that museums are already heavily dependent on volunteers. Yet the involvement of individuals who may play no or minimal roles as «educators», may help a closer engagement with non-traditional groups to come about through their own networks and status.

As a variation on this theme, the recently concluded first phase of a European Union Museums and Adult Education project considered the role of keyworkers, i.e. those individuals who act across sectors in support of learning opportunities for adults in general but also for excluded groups. They play a mediating role alongside, between and within museums and will include youth workers, arts and community workers, adult educators, volunte-
ers and public employees. The aims of the research were to –

* identify the extent and manner of use of keyworkers in selected European museums;
* identify the learning needs of keyworkers in relation to using museums as resources;
* pilot and evaluate learning resources and programmes with selected keyworkers.

The main partners were the V&A Museum in London, the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, and Stockholm Education. In Dublin, for example, a group of elderly adults living in the vicinity of the museum, yet socially excluded from it, were invited to become engaged in learning activities within the institution. Over time, they gained sufficient confidence and skill to produce a range of artefacts for an exhibition which they curated. In addition, they subsequently took on the role of keyworkers in order to engage the interest of other groups of elderly adults who, equally, had had no previous relationship with the Museum.

In Stockholm, the city itself was utilised as an eco-museum. Here, bus drivers, traffic wardens and mounted police personnel, among other public workers operating on the streets of the city, facilitated adult learning for members of the public in the city in their additional roles as keyworkers. Initially, courses were organised for them, with the support of their employers, and covered the cultural history of the city and debates about its future. Major resources for the course were cultural institutions of Stockholm, and the museums acted as a starting point.

In both examples the experiences gained by these adults impacted favourably on their private as well as their public lives. Arguably, the engagement of lay people, through LLPs or through direct involvement with museums and adult education providers, might increase the means by which the non-participation of under-represented groups such as those I have already described by NIACE is tackled. By so doing, not only would the possibility of attracting funds become more feasible, but, arguably, a greater understanding, awareness and regard by such groups should accrue to the instigators.

For many of the groups we wish to attract, competition has increased. Moreover, in addition to what may be called traditional forms of competitive provision, the development of technology has widened choices for many. In the preamble to a Conference session at a recent London-based commercial event billed as «the premier leisure attractions forum», Giles Clarke, Head of Exhibitions and Education at the Natural History Museum, noted that –

In their drive to increase visitor numbers and to encourage visits from a broader cross-section of the public (my italics), museums have started to employ many of the technologies and media more often associated with the entertainment industry.

While entertainment and enjoyment are stressed in the leisure industry, it is also valid to suggest that the opportunity for informal learning by adults in (to some) more amenable surroundings than museums (or Adult Education Centres) is a factor to consider. Yet questions abound:
* What is distinctive about museum or adult educational provision?
* Can an equitable balance be achieved between presentation of standards and popular appeal?
* Does one way of providing some equilibrium between learning and enjoyment rest not only with effective programme design and practice, but with the employment of technology?

David Gray, in discussing the Internet as a tool, quotes Hoopes:

The Internet and the World Wide Web, by giving us a new medium or digital communication, have forever transformed the relationship between museums and their audience.¹

Thus, another type of partnership – between the adult learner and information mediated through technology. In this way the independent adult learner gains access and opportunity through free choice. Yet just as technology has its adherents, it also has its critics:

Museums need to stop confusing education with technology. Technology doesn’t educate by itself, and all the bells and whistles and computers and virtual reality things do nothing more or less than suggest that looking is the equivalent of learning, and that hearing is the equivalent of understanding.²

That said, the judicious use of technology as a tool, a means to an end is, like all tools, as useful or otherwise as the persons engaged, in their various roles, in presenting and/or using it to access material.

The need to strive for balance of provision was referred to earlier; what of those without access to technology or the necessary skills to use it, and whose social needs are of a different order? Given constraints on resources, how should priorities be decided, with which groups and for how long? The issue of sustainability of provision is an important one, for having raised initial interest and expectation, how is this then maintained, and at what cost and by whom?

In conclusion, if the relationship between adult learners, museums and adult educators are to prosper, Hazel Moffat, a former Inspector of Museums, is surely correct:

Staff in museums, galleries and adult education institutions need the support of national and regional organisations if the innovations being introduced are to have a wider currency. Government department funding bodies and professional associations must be committed to increasing the number of adults who benefit from a full range of educational opportunities in museums and galleries and take the necessary steps to accomplish it.³

This, it seems, is beginning to happen.

Museums and adult education providers have had an historically respectable if semi-distant relationship; a less impressive record, over time, with some honourable exceptions, of collaborative provision for adult learners. They seem to be coming to the view that reciprocity, rather than separation, provides a way forward, much as the banner of one Mechanics’ Institute (the first purpose-built Adult Education Centres in the United Kingdom) in the last century proclaimed that:

Knowledge is power, union is strength, (and heaven helps them who help themselves).
These sentiments remain valid. Self-help also has a respectable history with regard to adult learners. However, there are indications, through local, regional and national initiatives by museums and adult educators, by policy changes in professional Associations and, not least, from Government, that progress, as opposed to mere change, is taking place. Thus, the commissioning of national reports such as those referred to earlier, the creation of the Social Exclusion Unit, shows political will to pursue the goal of a learning society.

At both the policy and operational levels there are some excellent initiatives to celebrate. The widening of access, not only to the public as active «recipients» but to both lay and other professional people as valuable resources in the whole process of identifying, designing, running and assessing events will also require greater consideration, given the developing number of delivery systems that technology has provided, and given that Government will need to be apprised of the fact that museums and adult education bodies wish to be seen as active partners with it at the level of delivery.

Perhaps the last words should come from an adult learner, together with a museologist's view and an adult educator's observation.

With reference to an adult learner's project at the Open Museum, Glasgow –

It was the process. It was great fun to go into the vaults of the Museum and see what's stacked on the shelves, and at the same time I thought it was important in that the city has these facilities, it has these resources. I thought it was a great success.

and – from the museologist:

The Open Museum is dedicated to widening ownership of the city's collections. It aims to free the reserves that lie hidden in stores and cupboards, and to forge a link between the skills of our staff and the needs of interested groups. Above all, we want to create a museum which relates to the lives of people in their own communities.21

In a volume on lifelong education, written in 1929, the British adult educator Basil Yeaxlee quotes the American adult educator Edward Lindeman:

Meaning must reside in the things for which people strive, the goals which they set for themselves, their wants, needs, desires and wishes ... among other things intelligence, power, self-expression, freedom, creativity, appreciation, enjoyment, fellowship ... They want to count for something; they want their experience to be vivid and meaningful; they want their talents to be utilised.21

This text was offered as Keynote Paper at WEA Conference «Working Together: Museums and the WEA», Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, 18 November 1999.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction (1919), Final Report, HMSO
5. Scherer, M R (1934), *A Note on Adult Education in British Museums*, New York, p 31
8. The full text can be found on the Internet at: http://www.dfee.gov.UK/post 16/sect cont.htm
11. NIACE (1999), *op.cit.*, para.34, p 7
12. see Chadwick, A F (1980), *The Role of the Museum and Art Gallery in Community Education*, University of Nottingham, chapter VIII passim
15. *ibid.*, pp 69-92
17. see Anderson, D, *op.cit.*, p 107 Note: Council street cleaners in Greenwich, South London, are being trained to help them cope with tourists’ queries (*Guardian*, 14/7/99)
20. Gray, D E (1997), ‘Learning in Museums: the Internet as a resource and data gathering tool’, *Journal for Education in Museums* 18, p 15
23. Open Museum (1993), *TVMS: Open Museum II*

Alan Chadwick is a senior lecturer in The School of Educational Studies, University of Surrey. His co-edited book (with Annette Stannett), Museums and Adults Learning: Perspectives from Europe, is shortly to be published by The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education in The United Kingdom.

Adr. Martlets, Mare Hill, Pulborough
West Sussex RH20 2EB, UK
Fax +44-(0)1798 874028
E-mail ACH1000@aol.com