

## ESSAY

### Really useful conference on research?

Report on the 39th annual Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research on the Education of Adults (SCUTREA), *Really useful research? Critical perspectives on evidence-based policy and practice in lifelong learning*. Downing College, Cambridge, 7–9 July 2009.

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In a recent article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, Fox (2009), Director of the Institute of Ideas, responds to a previous article that suggests ‘the age of the scholar is over’, by arguing for the need for ‘useless knowledge’. I suppose this is the kind of argument that I wanted to see emerge from the 39th annual conference of SCUTREA. It is appropriate for me to write this report, as I suggested the theme for this year’s annual conference, and it was the 31st consecutive annual conference I had attended, the first being held at Owens Park, organised by the Department of Adult Education, University of Manchester in July 1979. This was towards the end of my first year of employment as a lecturer in adult education at the University of Hull. SCUTREA was a strange place then. Having only been used to the British Sociological Association (BSA) conference before this, which was a lively if daunting place for open discussions and debate among academic sociologists and postgraduate students about the latest sociological research and developments in theoretical perspectives, SCUTREA stood in stark contrast. SCUTREA was friendly, without the competitive edge of the BSA, but it was also closed and elitist compared with the BSA. My lasting recollection of that first conference was not the quality of research papers and discussions about research, but the AGM at which my Hull colleague who had taken me to conference, the late Muriel Crane, proposed Richard Hoggart (her former colleague in the Hull Department of Adult Education) for individual membership into SCUTREA. After some debate, the SCUTREA officers declined Hoggart’s membership on the basis that he had done little of substance to further research into the education of adults. What kind of elitist organisation I had stumbled into? So daunting was the atmosphere of the conference that it was not until 1986 – my eighth conference – that I dared to put forward a paper. This is not the place to write the history of SCUTREA. At various points in its history, there have been accounts of its earlier development (Thomas 1984; Zukas 1996).

Since 1986, I have given at least one conference paper each year. At the same time I have also been involved in the ongoing development of SCUTREA, as a participant in the conference planning group, as a conference organiser and as Honorary Secretary and Chair for 3 years in each role. I have helped to move SCUTREA away

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from its elitist and rarefied roots in traditional universities with extra-mural departments planted in the first half of the twentieth century. The rules of membership had been relaxed by the early 1990s enabling the 'new universities' to come into institutional membership. More or less at the same time, the diversification of what constituted adult education was beginning to broaden the scope of membership, and as traditional university extra-mural departments began to close over the next 20 years, individual membership became more significant than institutional membership. By then there were perceived to be no real benefits of institutional over individual membership. At the same time, the organisational diversification of research on adult learning, was paralleled by the challenges to the boundaries of academic disciplines. Inter-disciplinary research was increasingly common. Education as a subject discipline has never been fully accepted. It has always been inter-disciplinary, borrowing from other disciplines, particularly history, psychology and sociology. Indeed, SCUTREA had originally organised around these three disciplines through 'interest groups'. Research had been organised through these interest groups. Subsequently, a comparative interest group formed to focus on international and cross-cultural research. Soon after that, a women's interest group was formed, which inevitably cut across all of the other interest groups, and this was the beginning of the end of this way of organising the conference. However, much of the research continued to be policy-oriented, whatever its disciplinary origins, driven by the need to support or argue against government policies on adult education. In a higher education (HE) context, adult education as a research area failed to 'fit' the traditional academic divisions, and as a consequence, what might be considered as research on adult education was distributed throughout HE institutions, particularly in the 'new universities'. The need for the research to be relevant to contemporary issues became evident. SCUTREA wanted to be consulted on policy initiatives, including the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). As an organisational strategy in the RAE, adult education research was included in Education, although it had as much, if not more, in common with other subject areas, depending on the orientation of the research. These challenges were compounded by three other developments. First, through increasing internationalisation, there was an awareness that the research interests were no longer 'local' to the UK, but now global. From the mid-1980s relationships with sister adult education research organisations in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Canada and Europe, saw the 'globalisation' of the research agenda, albeit mainly limited to English-speaking academic communities. Second, there was the beginnings of a shift in discourse from 'adult education' to 'lifelong learning'; and third, was the growing influence of postmodernism as challenge to academic boundaries. From SCUTREA's perspective, the organisation spent much time reflecting on whether it was shifting from the margins to the mainstream, and the significance of this for the kind of research its membership was able to undertake, and the potential sources of funding for the kind of research it membership was committed to.

As part of these developments, the conference was organised around contemporary themes. There was a tension in doing this as the process of selecting papers in terms of not just their academic quality but their contribution to the agreed theme could potentially be less inclusive, if it excluded proposed papers that fell outside the agreed 'theme'. There has also been exclusivity around the boundaries of what constitutes 'adult education' research. Indeed, 'lifelong

learning', together with internationalisation, has widened the research agendas of what was traditionally considered as appropriate research by university adult education. Areas being researched in other parts of HE institutions, such as human resource development and work-based learning which was most often in the domain of business or management studies, were reluctantly recognised as appropriate to the conference.

With postmodernism, the crossing of borders and barriers has become a genuine commitment of the organisation, and in its effort to be inclusive, submitted abstracts of papers are rarely rejected without giving the authors an opportunity to rewrite their abstract so that its perceived limitations whether in terms of 'fitting the theme' or needing to 'improve' the academic and scholarly style. It is worth noting that, typically, it is the abstracts that are refereed rather than the papers themselves. A significant part of the decision-making for the acceptance of papers is the extent to which the abstract appears to 'fit' the conference theme. The conference themes are usually agreed a year or so in advance. At the time when the 2009 theme was selected, my own university was developing its strategic plan, and prominent in the discussions was discourse around 'evidence-based' and/or 'researched informed' and even 'research-led' teaching. The RAE was underway, and this discourse was being used in that process too. The process, of course, had formed criteria to judge the quality of research – indeed, what counts as research. In our sub-sector of adult education research, there was unease with the discourse – not only because it suggested that our research needed to be 'policy-led', or 'driven' to be valued, but also had to have measurable outcomes and 'impact'. SCUTREA has always taken seriously the need to link teaching and research, and for decades has made significant contributions to knowledge and understanding of pedagogy.

It seemed appropriate to borrow the nineteenth century idea of 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson 1988), apply it to research, and subject it to critical examination – useful for whom, and for what purpose(s)? The question mark following 'really useful research', and the subtitle 'critical perspectives on evidence-based policies and practices in lifelong learning', was intended to indicate the criticality that conference papers should address. To ensure the underlying principle was understood and shared, there was a preamble in the *Call for Papers* that set the context:

As researchers and teachers, we work in an audit culture in which our research output is measured not just in quantitative terms, but also in terms of impact. Whilst there are issues around the notion of impact, we are required to demonstrate that our research has relevance and practice value, and policy applications. As teachers we are supposed to be able to demonstrate that our pedagogical practices are informed by research, and for managers, administrators, policy-makers and politicians there is the need to demonstrate that policies are equally informed by research. The relationship between research and its practical uses is not clear-cut and has always been problematic. We know that there are many different types of research, of which policy and practitioner research are but two. Are some types of research being privileged over others? Is it possible to define and agree what kind of research will be 'really useful', and useful for whom? And do we accept the instrumental view of research that it has to be 'really useful'? What is evidence, and what sort of evidence speaks loudest to different stakeholders? What are the implications of this for different types of research? And for what purposes could research be really useful?

The call for papers led to the receipt of around 70 abstracts, which translated into 54 papers. Typically, the conference offers six sessions with a choice of five or six sets of paired papers. The conference has generally moved away from having plenary sessions (given that one plenary session is the equivalent of up to 12 conference papers). The success of the conference is often determined by how well the papers that are paired lead to effective discussion. It is considered ‘bad practice’ to simply read the paper – besides the time allocated would mean 3500 words need to be read very quickly. In one of the sessions I attended this happened. The other ‘error’ that can occur is ‘death by Powerpoint’. Of course, each conference room is expected to be fully equipped with data projectors and laptops (increasingly with sound facilities). However, those attending the conference are encouraged to read the papers in advance so they are able participate in the discussion, after the presenters have briefly summarised and clarified their key arguments, and who then can expand their ideas through discussions with the audience, as well as with the author(s) of the paired paper. This makes for more active and engaging conference process. This, we believe, reflects the principles of ‘good adult education’.

To more fully review the conference would need five or six reviewers as it was not possible to attend parallel sessions. Whilst it is possible to review the conference proceedings, the idea of a conference is much more than the published papers. These are little more than the stimuli for the discussions and debates at the conference. I will here focus on the sessions that I attended. In two of the sessions I was co-author of one of the pairs of papers, and in a third session I was acted as chair. In the first session, I chose to attend a pair of papers by colleagues I have got to know in recent years, one from Australia – Rooney (2009), and one from Canada – Gouthro (2009), who was also chair of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education. Rooney had twice won the award for the best SCUTREA student paper. Her paper, entitled ‘Has the time come to count what counts?’ focused on the tensions created for researchers in adult education by being made to feel responsible for producing ‘useful’ research. For Rooney, the key question is ‘what counts as good research?’ The scientific paradigm related to government policy-making prevails. In spite of a long period of time in which sociological theories have been used to challenge the supposed superiority of ‘scientific’ nature has failed to convince policy-makers, who still demand numbers, for it is these that ‘construct reality’. Rooney was anxious not to dismiss quantitative research, but wanted to support the argument that they merely ‘tell a story’ in much the same as research data generated through qualitative methods. Her argument appeared to become less clear when she moved to refer to a ‘pagan’ approach to research. The problematising of the ‘really useful’ aspects of the research, the critique, was forceful, but the reconstruction of the purpose of research was less convincing. In recent times, the significance of spirituality has found its way into SCUTREA conferences, and offers the promise of a refreshingly different approach to both data collection and analysis. However, in its early formation, the nature of the challenge is less clear. References to the analysis as being in “‘not quite’ postmodern/modern’ reflected Rooney’s struggle to move beyond postmodernism, whilst taking on board both the ‘value’ of postmodernism in opening up new possibilities, and instead adding to the potential obscurity of alternative perspectives.

Similarly, Gouthro also focused on questions about where the power to value certain kinds of research lies, and what influences the assessment of what is ‘really useful’. Her starting point was similar to Rooney’s in that they shared a critique of

the idea that there was a consensus about what constitutes ‘really useful research’. Gouthro provided three reasons as to why those researchers working in critical paradigms needed to question ‘evidence-based policies and practices’: (1) the need to challenge neo-liberal influences which emphasised individualism, competition and market place within adult education; (2) the increasing pressure on academics to generate resources by ‘winning’ funding through writing large-scale project bids, which is most often targeted towards meeting someone else’s research agenda; and (3) similar to Rooney’s argument, to challenge the accountability of research primarily through quantitative methods. These themes were to run through discussions of many other papers at the conference, and there was an almost inevitable degree of consensus because of both the nature of the Call for Papers, and the values of those who attend this conference. There was, in my view, little dissent from the critical challenge of the conference theme itself – no one defended the existing research paradigm that believes it is not only possible but desirable to measure utility and differentiate those research projects. Nor was there conviction that policy-oriented research was going to help make a difference for decision-makers. The prevailing view appeared to be that the research process is more important than the results.

The second session I attended consisted of a single paper by Lawy, Diment, and Quinn (2009). I chose to attend this paper because it was relevant to the area of work in which I had been teaching – post-16 provision for those in ‘jobs without training’; also, the subtitle of the paper promised ‘critical research on evidence-based policy and practice’. What was really different about this paper was that the authors provided an example of a research project, commissioned by the European Social Fund, the Learning and Skills Council, and Connexions which was producing ‘evidence’ that was challenging the assumptions of the funders. Consequently, the nature of the evidence was very much in terms of what the funders would want – quantitative evidence. However, the statistical evidence they generated led to a different set of conclusions in terms of supposed attitudes of young people towards school and college, and the transition to work, and this was backed up with qualitative data derived from in-depth interview from within the sample. The research shows how these young people, likely to be ‘written off’, are ‘active co-constructors of their lives’. The analysis pointed to the significance of ‘labelling’ that has been prominent among qualitative researchers since the late 1950s/early 1960s. It was argued that the evidence points to structural inequalities, and therefore young people should ‘not be blamed’ for the predicament in which they find themselves. The discussion focused around two contradictory issues. First, this is not what the funders of the research will want to hear, and therefore is not likely to influence government policies; and second, the research itself is evidence-based and should therefore be treated with as much critical analysis as the research that policy-makers do value.

In the third session, I participated in a session with papers given by Guy (2009), from Athens in Georgia, and by Mojab (2009), from the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education in Toronto. I had heard both speakers many times before, and I also knew that Mojab’s paper was to be awarded the prize for the paper making the most contribution towards social purpose. The paper by Guy focused on the value of historical research, as did one of my two papers. The value of historical research is not always evident, and there was an opportunity through this and other related

conference papers, to debate how far taking a historical perspective in our research is 'really useful'. I did not need to be convinced, and was therefore more interested in the methodological challenges that historical research can pose. Guy raised issues about selectivity and the problems of historical memory in researching issues to do with race and gender. Drawing on critical race theory, Guy pointed to the absence of challenges to both racialism and sexism in historical research. Historical evidence is invariably interpreted through a contemporary and academic lens. The choice of historical events or minority groups to research has an underlying set of values that often demonstrate a commitment to telling their stories. Conventional approaches to research would want the historical researcher to put aside such values in the interests of objectivity. Guy argued that this is mistaken, for in spite of the 'critical turn' taken in historical research, 'the telling of history is fundamentally a selective and interpretive exercise'. For Guy, 'really useful' historical research will tell the history of subordinate and marginalised groups that reject the accounts of 'Majoritarian' histories. By contrast, Mojab's research is very much focused on current political tensions in Iraq, and is based on interviews with NGOs working in Iraq, seeking to uncover and analyse their 'inner political, financial and cultural dynamics' that would help us understand what it means to be working as an adult educator in conditions of war, militarisation and occupation. The training provided clearly was not preparing the NGOs for their task; they complained of being 'workshopped out' through their discussions of the draft Iraqi constitution. Mojab's research task is not to challenge, but to extend the value of, critical theory in such research, if it is to be 'really useful' in identifying the encroachment of imperialism in adult education pedagogy.

The first of my two jointly written papers was in the fourth session. Following on some of the issues raised by Guy, Janet Coles and myself (Coles and Armstrong 2009) were wanting to use research to warn against the 'mass destruction' of historical sources of data. We set ourselves a hypothetical challenge to illustrate the potential failure of libraries and archives to make informed choices about what to keep and what to dispose of. Our task was to see whether we could discover whether Richard Hoggart was a 'good teacher'. We had both experienced the dismantling of libraries and archives in a total of three different universities. I had previously worked in the Department of Adult Education at the University of Hull, where Richard Hoggart had begun his teaching career some 30 years before I began mine. At the time I left Hull Department, it had as head of department a key historian in adult education (Bernard Jennings) and a librarian with a significant archive of historical resources. Following the closure of the Department, there is a significant absence of resources and materials relating to Richard Hoggart's decade in the Department. It is telling that Sheffield Hallam University has now one of the largest archives on the life and work of Richard Hoggart. When I joined Birkbeck's extramural department in 1995, my first task was to dismantle and remove the adult education library including significant historical adult education resources built up through the 1970s and 1980s by Elizabeth Monkhouse and Nell Keddie. Both Janet and I were at Leeds when its extra-mural department was closed down in 2006. We saw first-hand the break up of valuable historical collections belonging to Raybould, and were made aware of the historical resource, as well as the human resource, costs of decisions to close university departments. Inevitably perhaps the discussion of our paper focused less on ideological issues than purely practical suggestions of how to

retain valuable historical data in this digital age. Our session was shared with Tony Brown from Australia, whose research was ‘really useful’ insofar it reminded us of the mission and vision of those educators in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, including the Chartists and Plebs League, who contrasted ‘really useful knowledge’ (purposeful) with simply useful knowledge (instrumental) (Brown 2009).

I was asked to chair the papers by Sara Carpenter (also from the Ontario Institute in Toronto) and Andre Grace, another Canadian, based in Alberta. The paper by Carpenter (2009) raised some interesting methodological issues emerging from the methodology of institutional ethnography. The links with Grace’s paper (Grace 2009) were evident in that he was providing an institutional critique of Canadian (if not more generally North American) HE and its failure to ‘mainstream’ the place, position and participation of sexual minorities through both pedagogical practices and curriculum development. In both papers, the challenge as to whether their research was ‘really useful’ lies in the impact they have on institutional policies and practices.

My second paper, written with Helen Bradbury (Armstrong and Bradbury 2009) was delivered in the sixth and final session. It was paired with a paper by Patricia Holland Webb (2009), from Pennsylvania State University. Holland Webb focused on participatory social inquiry. Such research focuses on ‘real world’ issues that seek to challenge and change. Being a global inquiry, it felt as if it *had to be* ‘really useful’ for changing, not just informing international policies and practices. However, the paper itself focused on some of the methodological issues about access, authority and transparency in the inquiry process. The timing of our paper was seemingly appropriate, since we wanted to draw out what impact the critical debates about ‘really useful’ research were likely to have had through the conference. Our paper was set in the context of our own institution’s attempt to develop its strategic plan, focusing on teaching, research and knowledge transfer as needing to be research informed, research-led or evidence-based. The paper was based on some small-scale research we undertook within our faculty that we hoped would generate more critical debates about the relationship between research and policies and pedagogical practices. At the end of the conference, it would have been good to see if we were now clearer in what we, and others, mean when they make these demands for ‘really useful research’. But we ran out of time.

We went away well aware that the annual conference that is much more than a series of conference papers as mentioned earlier. The conference itself is in many ways like an annual family reunion, but it takes very seriously the need to draw in new participants, and to encourage inclusion from other sectors, and other nations. The fact that many delegates do return to subsequent conferences would indicate that they found the conference ‘really useful’, but this does not just happen. Conferences need to be carefully planned, and well organised, with quality contributions in the form of papers and discussion. In SCUTREA, there is also the commitment to staying true to what are commonly shared principles of good adult education practice. To facilitate this, there is a considerable effort in the conference to ensure that beyond the academic discussions, there are opportunities for informal meetings, and sharing of ideas and experience. Although there is typically not an opening plenary at SCUTREA conferences, there is always a welcome for both returning, and in particular new participants. Each of the two evenings of the conference have organised activities that are designed to bring participants together in more informal

ways. There is a conference dinner at which awards are made for the best graduate student paper, and the paper that contributes most to the organisation's social purpose commitment. The conference ends with an opportunity for participants to give feedback and suggest improvements, as well as themes for future conferences.

At the moment, SCUTREA focuses primarily on its annual conference; in the past there have been joint seminars with other HE-based organisations, such as the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) and the Research Committee of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning. Close working relationships are made with other sister organisations in North America and Australia, and efforts are being made to work more closely with the European Society for Research in the Education of Adults, which has significant overlapping membership with SCUTREA. The journal produced by the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, *Studies in the Education of Adults*, has a strong historical link to SCUTREA. As SCUTREA approaches its 40th anniversary, there is a sense in which it must be 'really useful' as it has no paid staff, a very small financial surplus, and yet has been able to provide a series of very successful conferences, all due to the commitment of those researchers in lifelong learning who value it as a forum for sharing and debating their research.

All SCUTREA papers can be found on the British Education Index website which also hosts conference papers for many other conferences, such as the British Education Research Association (BERA), which provide a fully searchable and extensive database of research on education and pedagogy (<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/bei>). The next SCUTREA conference will be held at the University of Warwick on 6–8 July 2010, which will celebrate the 40th anniversary of SCUTREA, with the theme of *Looking Back, Looking Forward: Learning, Teaching and Research in Adult Education Past, Present and Future*. Further details can be obtained from the website: <http://www.scutrea.ac.uk>.

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