

**Y Coleg Cymunedol Cenedlaethol   
a Mudiad Gwirfoddol  
The National Community College  
and Voluntary Movement**

**Raymond Williams Explainer**

**Social Purpose in Adult Education**

**Note:** This is a background paper to accompany our centenary celebration event video  
recorded on 5th July 2021, which includes contributions from a range of speakers including an historian, adult educators and learners, where these also feature in a concluding panel discussion.

**Introduction**

What is education, and in particular, adult education for? That question can be answered in so many different ways and the answer will often depend on the point of view of who is answering. In this explainer we are concerned mainly with the idea of social purpose, and especially with how Raymond Williams understood it. By this we mean the ways in which education contributes to society. This includes ways in which education helps us to relate to one another effectively, to understand how our society works, to understand our rights and responsibilities as citizens, to work with one another to build our communities and to confront challenges together such as climate change and inequality.

**Raymond Williams**

Raymond Williams (1921 – 1988) was born in the village of Pandy in the Welsh borders where his father, Harry, was the local railway signalman[[1]](#footnote-1). In 1932, Williams gained a scholarship to King Henry VIII Grammar School in Abergavenny[[2]](#footnote-2) from where he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1939. He graduated, after service in the army during the Second World War, in 1946. For the next fifteen years, Williams worked for the Oxford University Extra-Mural Delegacy delivering classes in English literature and drama in conjunction with the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA)[[3]](#footnote-3). The Delegacy had a reputation for ‘liberating the education of adults beyond any narrow … training’ and was, by instinct, ‘powerfully social democratic’. Adult educators, including Williams himself, envisaged the WEA’s future as a ‘vital force for facilitating … an informed and active citizenship’[[4]](#footnote-4). This was to be life-long education with a social purpose.

Williams’s involvement in adult education has been explained as ‘first and foremost about the working class, his own relationship with the class he came from and the collective emancipation of that class’. It was about how adult education could ‘help provide workers with emancipatory knowledge for the extension of working-class democracy and the best of working-class culture’[[5]](#footnote-5).

**Adult education and social change**

For Williams, adult education could be either a consequence of or, more importantly, a contributor to social change. Contributing to change was what mattered to him. He thought that, at its best, adult education had helped to bring about change in society especially at a time when change was needed more than ever. He referred to people entering adult education in the 1930s who were ‘interested in the process of building a social consciousness [an understanding or awareness of keys social issues] of an adequate kind… to meet new crises’. These were the crises of war, unemployment and Fascism, that were seen as ‘the crises of modern capitalist society’. The building of social consciousness was not about ‘delivering people some kind of boiled-down pap which would indicate some already decided course of action’. The building of social consciousness was ‘of real consciousness, of real understanding of the world’[[6]](#footnote-6).

**Old Humanists, Industrial Trainers and Public Educators**

Williams identified three strands of thinking about education - the Old Humanist, the Industrial Trainer and the Public Educator[[7]](#footnote-7).

The Old Humanists saw education as ‘an ideal process which should resist as far as possible the pushing claims of the world’. That was because meeting temporary practical needs was less important than maintaining ‘an incalculably valuable tradition’ especially with subjects of ‘the least practical importance’. This strand saw education as being the preserve of a relatively small minority.

The Industrial Trainers were those believing that the purpose of education ‘is to fit people to earn their living’. Its function was to ‘arrange that the right number of people with the right number of skills are trained in the right quantities’.

Public Educators considered the first duty of government to be ensuring that that ‘the people can think’. Williams saw this as ‘a radically different emphasis’ and one which involves ‘remaking an analysis of society’.

For Williams, the first two strands were out of the question for adult education. To base itself on the Old Humanist principle of education being for a small minority, would be to deny its own premise. Adopting the arguments of the Industrial Trainer, would, he believed mean the end of adult education because ‘quite frankly, better ways will be found of doing it’. Finally, a missionary principle had to be avoided also.

He advocated for a re-definition of education in terms of ‘a society rather different from the one that we have been accustomed to thinking about… in which it is assumed that society itself is an educative process, that society is a method of association and co-operation in which politics, economics, communication, education are directly related to the reality of living together, and in which control over the process is in the hands of people who use them’.

**Approach to teaching**

In his own classes, Williams was concerned with ‘equipping his students with skills, not stuffing them with knowledge’[[8]](#footnote-8) and used the long-standing adult education methodology of in-class discussion. He was interested in developing skills in thinking critically and in preparing how to argue a case. As Williams later explained, making students ‘proficient in literary history seemed to me to be a poor substitute for making them able to read literature with intelligence and insight’[[9]](#footnote-9). Raymond Williams believed that this made students more self-sufficient in their learning and encouraged richer, democratic participation. As the Ministry of Reconstruction’s Adult Education Committee pointed out in 1919, adult education was ‘not merely a class, but a club and a college…For, of the two hours of a tutorial class, the first only is used for exposition; the second is sacred to discussion. So that a class consists…not of … students and a tutor, but of [a group of] students who learn together’.

**Curriculum**

Traditionally, the WEA curriculum was focused on the humanities and social sciences, delivering courses in subjects such as literature, history, economics, international affairs, psychology, and the arts. These provided a basis for understanding the world as it was, particularly during the turbulent interwar decades. During the Second World War, classes engaged students in topics such as reconstruction and the Beveridge Report – ideas about the post-war world. In his fifteen years teaching for the WEA, Williams was closely involved in developing new subjects such as ‘public expression’ which taught students to speak in public, critique the language of the speeches they heard from others and write letters to newspapers and articles for trade union newspapers[[10]](#footnote-10). In effect, how to use language to communicate ideas, empowering and enabling his students to advocate for change.

**How Raymond Williams defined Social Purpose**

On leaving his role with the WEA in 1961, Raymond Williams wrote an open letter[[11]](#footnote-11) in which he argued that the ‘organisation of social justice, and the institutions of democracy are worth working for’. He was thinking here about the WEA which he said had always believed that ordinary people should be highly educated as ‘an end justifying itself and not simply as a means to power’ and that participation in society was all important. WEA put that belief into practice by encouraging people to take part in the organisation and its democratic decision making structure. Raymond Williams defined his own social purpose as a teacher ‘as the creation of an educated and participating democracy’. Williams's ideas projected the ambition of early 20th century adult educators into the 1960s and in so doing provided a blueprint for redefining adult education for the modern age.

**How others have understood Social Purpose**

Forty years after Raymond Williams’s open letter, Jane Thompson wrote about reclaiming social purpose in lifelong learning as ‘part of the radical tradition in adult education that links education to the unfulfilled desires of ordinary people to change the circumstances of their lives’[[12]](#footnote-12). Others refer to a social justice agenda in which adult education is ‘seen as a lever for empowerment and emancipation’ and being ‘for collective benefit rather than individual empowerment’[[13]](#footnote-13). It seems likely that Raymond Williams would have both recognised and agreed with these writers.

**What would Raymond Williams say today?**

Raymond Williams would see in today's adult education programmes a familiar world to that which he had left in 1961: there remains the mixture of education as training, with an emphasis on skills and employability, and education as a social purpose; there remain, also, the concerns about the curriculum and whether it should be narrow and focused on measurable economic or policy outcomes or whether it should be broad and appeal to the breadth of interests of the students themselves.

Williams would doubtless feel that the following observations he made in 1983 on the need for adult education are as important than ever now – ‘this is a social order which really does not know in what crucial respects it is ignorant, in what crucial respects it is incompletely conscious and therefore how central this collaborative process of Adult education is still central’[[14]](#footnote-14).

**What is the purpose of Adult Education today? Has Economic Purpose overshadowed Social Purpose?**

Raymond Williams warned of the rise of the industrial trainer in the 1960s, a figure who stood at the front of the classroom delivering an education which could be repeated ad nauseam in a factory setting or the workshop, but which did little for the activation of the student as a democratic citizen. Half a century later still, the descendants of the industrial trainer are now in the ascendant, with public policy prioritising skills development over other forms of learning. Consequently, it is argued, ‘education is reduced to employability; self-worth to market worth; citizens to consumers; and social solidarity to self-interest’[[15]](#footnote-15).

**Where can we see Social Purpose adult education today? Which contemporary crises can it address?**

Whilst the economic agenda is undoubtedly dominant and Raymond Williams’s desire for an education with a social purpose remains largely unfulfilled, adult education with a social purpose has not been extinguished altogether and it remains as relevant today, as it was in the 1960s. Arguably, the greatest challenges facing us a century on from William’s birth are the climate and ecological crisis and building a socially just society after years of austerity and the COVID pandemic, with the racial and other inequalities it has both created and exposed. The need for Public Educators who can stimulate critical thinking and analysis of the inequalities of contemporary society is self-evident.

Amongst case studies highlighted in the final report of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education (2019)[[16]](#footnote-16) is the WEA North East England Green Branch whose Lottery funded project to identify how multi-racial neighbourhoods in Newcastle upon Tyne might prepare for climate incidents, and strengthen environmental preparedness is described as adult education inspired ‘civic ecology’ in action. While in “Life-changing things happen”, their study of four residential adult education colleges, Sharon Clancy and John Holford find that ‘the college experience fosters critical thinking and understandings of politics and society which challenge mainstream and establishment views: it “changes the way we think about the world”’[[17]](#footnote-17).

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14. Williams, R. (1983) Adult education and Social Change: Lectures and Reminiscences in Honour of Tony McLean, in McIlroy, J. and Westwood, S. *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education.* Leicester: NIACE. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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16. <https://www.centenarycommission.org/wp-content/uploads/reports/The-Centenary-Commission-on-Adult-Education-Report-HI-RES.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Clancy, S and Holford, J. (2017) “Life-changing things happen”: How residential adult education   
    transforms learning and lives. University of Nottingham. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)