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Adult learning and the pandemic

By Professor Sir Alan Tuckett

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If I start with myself, the pandemic posed immediate challenges. I received a letter from our government four weeks after I isolated myself, telling me not to leave the house, even to empty the bins, for at least 12 weeks as I am one of the 2 million most vulnerable. Questions then arose about how best to use time. Firstly, since I can no longer go for a walk, how to exercise efficiently in house and garden. Secondly, whether to prioritise tasks put off for a decade or two, now that I had time on my hands. Third, how to maintain contact with friends, colleagues, children, grandchildren. I am still working, but just one day a week on average, and work is the source of a good deal of stimulus. But what else can I learn?

Options come at me from a variety of directions. Exercise classes on the BBC, and now exercises for the elderly. Literary festivals offering a broad cultural pot pourri. Film sites offering seasons on Fellini, Bresson – a chance to explore the origins of film noir, opera from the New York Met, tours of the world's great art galleries. A strong sense of the motivational dimension of terrestrial broadcasting, which seems to have had a renaissance these last three months. But what will trigger mild curiosity into decisions to join groups to learn online? This is surely not just a question for me alone – turning passive curiosity into active learning is a key role for adult educators, now as before.

Then there is the mess our government has made of managing the epidemic. It provokes a real interest in epidemiology – backed by voracious reading of press, commentary in the press and on-line, and discussions with everyone I am in contact with. The serial gap between grand policy promises and inadequate practice on the ground recalls the need for education designed to support critical citizenship and the capacity to distinguish spin from evidence. Citizenship education for a vibrant democracy – facing future challenges through enlightened debate is again a consistent aspiration for adult educators. But how do we turn our sense of its importance to practice that engages the hearts and minds of citizens?

Next, I have been struck by the modest practical expressions of mutuality and solidarity with which people responded to the lockdown in Britain. It was in striking contrast to the broken discourse of two communities of Britons arguing furiously, with neither side listening, that has



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characterised so much public discourse in Britain since Brexit. Some of that mutuality has been damaged by the arrogant behaviour of our government's chief policy adviser Dominic Cummings who ignored the rules he helped write. But holding on to a public mood in which public goods have been valued afresh seems an important part of our work.

In a surprisingly short time our university, like so many others has moved provision online. So to have voluntary sector providers like the Workers' Educational Association. What are the challenges in securing the same group solidarity, rich peer dialogue that characterises great classes when the conversation is at a distance. And, afterwards what will the balance be between online and face to face learning. For some, like the Open University or the National Extension College in the UK these issues have long been central to their pedagogy, but they come fresh minted to many providers. And what is the role of community outreach workers in a socially distanced future.

The bigger questions facing us – whether we can use the caesura to re-engineer our societies to confront and ameliorate the climate crisis, and whether we can create and sustain economies and social relations where inequality and marginalisation diminish dramatically, where gender equality is secured, and racism eradicated – scarcely seem to be on our national agenda. How can adult educators help put them there? What alliances do we need to make? How much will we rely on learning by doing?

And then there is the economic recession – the prospect, (in the USA already) the certainty of millions of jobs lost in the fallout from the lockdown. It seems to me that at a time when we need the maximum level of inter-national co-operation and solidarity, narrow national agendas increasingly dominate. Remaining remorselessly committed to working together north and south, as DVV International does is of ever more critical importance. But for myself I think the pandemic makes the dream of 'no-one left behind' that much harder to realise.