

Key points

Democratic engagement is a key factor in sustainable development, and life-long learning is *conducive* to community democracy

The potentially critical importance of education in the Welsh post-devolution democratic *deficit* has not been fully explored

Essential and vocational skills on their own will not secure sustainable, resilient and prosperous communities and workplaces

A bureaucratic over-professionalisation of teaching, based solely on assessment and teaching qualifications is deterring inspirational personnel from other professions

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Making the case for a new 'Democratic Engagement Curriculum' for adult learning

Introduction

Healthy, Wealthy and Wise notes that 'there has been very little curriculum-based activity on sustainable development in adult learning'.¹ It does however evidence many positive links between adult learning and community engagement, the building of social capital, an awareness of current affairs and the likelihood to vote. It concludes that 'Adult learning certainly does appear to foster an increase in active citizenship'.

I would argue that, central to the sustainable development of communities, nations and the wider world and its environment is the empowerment of citizens to engage democratically.

Westall (2015)² notes that there is much evidence of the importance of increasing participation in sustainable development strategies and implementation and refers to the democratic

¹ Learning and Work Institute (2017): *Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: The impact of adult learning across the UK 2015-17*, p21-24.

² Westall, Andrea (2015): *The Relationship between Democracy and Sustainable Development*. Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development.

challenges. Lafferty (2012)³ also explores the ‘impasse of dysfunctional democracy’ in the context of sustainable development.

The aim of this thinkpiece is, firstly, to put in context why, in the ‘post-truth era’, a post-devolution, bilingual and diverse Wales desperately needs a new ‘Democratic Engagement Curriculum’ for adult learning; and secondly, to explore what the nature of this curriculum might be and outline its implications for the adult learning workforce and others who facilitate learning.

Context

Having cut my teeth as a teacher in Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymini in the aftermath of the 1980s’ demolition of the coal mining industry and its communities, the relevance of the ‘new geography’ I was aspiring to teach at the time was all too obvious.⁴ The philosophy of this new radical geography was not just to ‘map man’s patent inhumanity to man’ factually but to empower students to seek answers and solve problems.⁵ These educational values travelled with me on my journey through Further Education institutions and their vocational courses and ultimately into Adult Community Learning. However, they often clashed with centrally prescribed and funding-driven curricula, a narrowly-defined skills agenda and stagnant teaching techniques.

Recently, my present employers, Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales, in conjunction with Co-operatives and Mutuals Wales, have organised a series of events to promote a democratic engagement and co-operative curriculum.⁶ The intention was not only to persuade the Welsh Government to include such elements in the new school curriculum and its evolving Adult Learning policy but also to initiate collaboration on the ground.

It was, therefore, encouraging when Kirsty Williams proclaimed her radical plans and visions for education in Wales at the annual Raymond Williams memorial lecture on 10 October 2018.⁷ Not often do you hear a Liberal Democrat Minister of Education, in a Welsh Labour Government administration, passionately embrace the concepts of a Marxist philosopher who, later in life, switched his political allegiance to Plaid Cymru. Raymond Williams, the

³ Lafferty, William (2012): Governance for sustainable development: the impasse of dysfunctional democracy. Chapter 14: Governance, Democracy and Sustainable Development - Moving Beyond the Impasse. Ed. James Meadowcroft, Oluf Langhelle and Audun Ruud. ISBN978 1 84980 756 2

⁴ Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymini is a Welsh Medium Comprehensive School which in the 1980’s served the Rhydney Valley and Gwent.

⁵ Harvey, David (1973): *Social Justice and the City*, p144-145. London: Edward Arnold.

⁶ Addysg Oedolion Cymru / Adult Learning Wales is a National Community College and Movement for Adult Learning. It was established in 2016 following a series of mergers involving Coleg Harlech, the WEA’s in Wales and YMCA Cymru Community College.

⁷ Williams, Kirsty (2018): Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture, sponsored by the Learning and Work Institute and Open University in Wales

most influential and internationally acclaimed Welsh philosopher of recent times, strongly advocated that life-long learning should be seen as conducive to creating a community democracy and developing the skills to challenge and shape culture.

During the lecture, the Education Secretary made the case that the Welsh Government's 'national mission of education reform' was 'stepping forward in the spirit of Raymond Williams's long revolution'.⁸ From the new schools curriculum through to adult education, she calls for a common culture and a shared citizenship that questions and challenges the established way of thinking and organising, providing the knowledge and skills to enable people to become part of the process of social change. Kirsty Williams also argues that, in the age of populism, without such a role for education, Wales's fragile democracy could be under threat.

The democratic deficit within Wales's young and developing post-devolution democracy has also been highlighted by other politicians, academics and political commentators alike.^{9/10} In most cases it is argued that confusion about the devolution settlement and the lack of a powerful Welsh press and media (both traditional and modern) has led to a low level of political engagement. What has not been fully explored and defined is the potentially critical role that our education system, including the Lifelong Learning sector, could have in oiling the wheels of democratic engagement.

Daniel Evans (2016) discusses what he calls the 'information deficit' in an article published on the Open Democracy website.¹¹ He sees a role for education:

'It is about political participation and the belief that the public can be a check against the state and abuses of power. This requires a politically educated public facilitated by an accessible and open flow of information... The public sphere goes beyond just 'the media' but also depends on the contribution of universities, schools and civil society, and... ultimately we all have a part to play in creating it'.

In the aftermath of the Brexit debate and the American presidential election, 'post-truth politics' has become a much-debated phenomenon, where politicians blatantly promote

⁸ Williams, Raymond (1961): *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto & Windus.

The 'long revolution' of the title is a revolution in culture, which Raymond Williams sees as having unfolded alongside the democratic revolution and the industrial revolution. Williams led the way in recognising the importance and the growth of the reading public in Western culture as a whole. His concept of revolution was not a one off event but the long term development of diverse processes in a complex world.

⁹ Andrews, Leighton (2017). Facebook, the media and democracy', RTS Annual Lecture, Y Senedd, Cardiff October 19, 2017.

¹⁰ Price, Adam (2018): Chapter 10, 'Democratic deficit' in Wales, the First and Final Colony. Y Lolfa.

¹¹ Evans, Daniel, Cardiff University (2017): *The BBC and Wales's Information Deficit*, *Open Democracy* <https://www.opendemocracy.net/daniel-evans/bbc-and-wales-information-deficit>.

unfounded facts and promises to voters. As Jonathan Friedland said in 2016, ‘the rise of social media and... TV channels and radio stations defined by political hue, means voters...get the entirety of their information from sources tailored to reflect their own views back to them.’¹² What has taken hold according to Marty Barton (2016), editor of the *Washington Post* is ‘... an alternate reality, a virtual reality, where lies are accepted as truth and where conspiracy theories take root in the fertile soil of falsehoods.’¹³

Youval Harari (2018), the Israeli historian, notes that fake news is not a new phenomenon but warns that the merger of biotech and infotech with its algorithms could soon push billions of humans out of the job market and undermine free-will, liberty, equality and truth.¹⁴

Implications for the adult learning workforce

Empowering democratic engagement has always been enshrined in adult community education’s vision as articulated by Graystone (2016):

*‘The provision of learning, skills and prosperity... will... require a commitment to democratic citizenship, inclusiveness, cultural enrichment, health and wellbeing, equalities and social justice... giving us the cutting edge that we need for our communities to be resilient, for our economy to adapt and for our democracy to thrive’.*¹⁵

The question arises to what extent the present workforce is fully in tune with the above vision and are equipped with the current contextual, pedagogic, linguistic and technological skill-set needed to deliver what is now needed. A skills audit could be considered, linked to a programme of staff development and revised employment and induction policies.

Before this takes place, the case needs to be made for a new ‘Democratic Engagement Curriculum’ and a strategy developed for its delivery. Tutors would ultimately deliver this new curriculum in the classroom, digitally or in the field. However, the involvement of others would be needed to make a strong case and support its development.

Not only would this involve curriculum leaders, quality managers and governors but also community leaders, partner organisations, senior educators and politicians. Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales’s ‘Democratic Engagement Curriculum’ was developed by its members including input from governors, learners, branches and partner

¹² Friedland, Jonathan (2016): <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/13/boris-johnson-donald-trump-post-truth-politician?CMP>

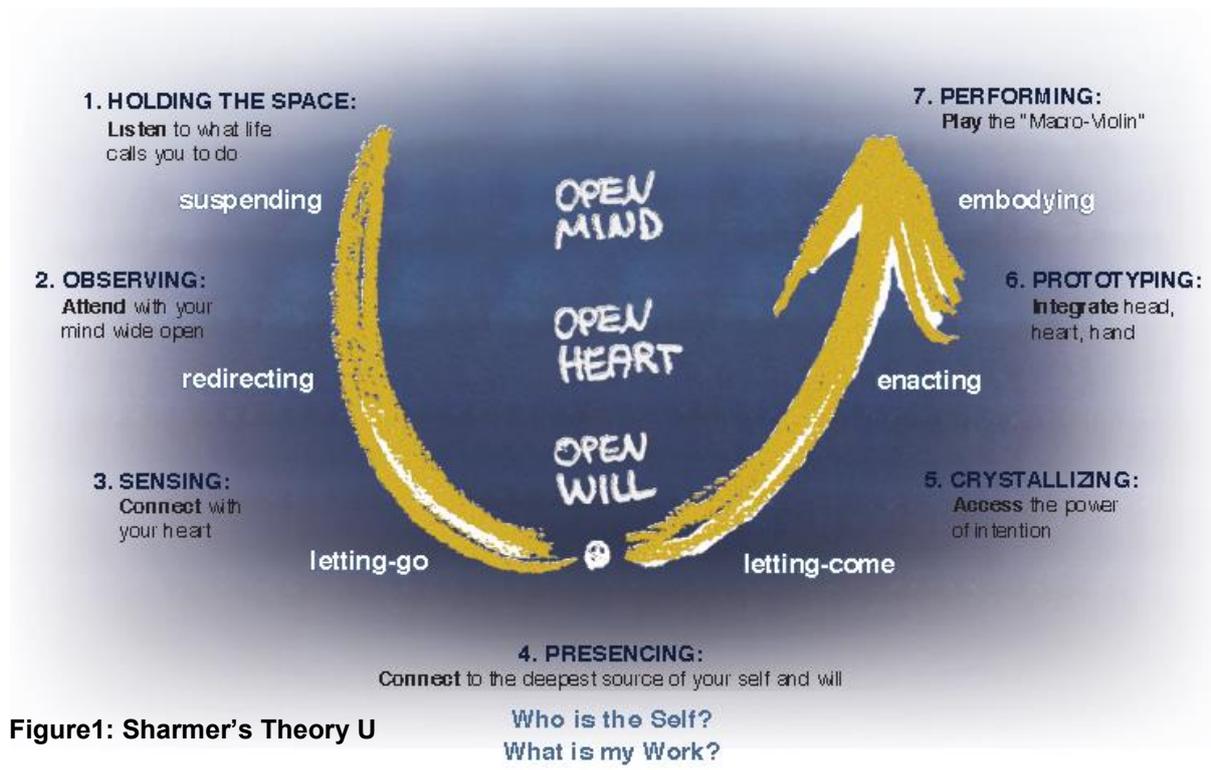
¹³ Barton, Marty (2016): Address to Temple University graduates http://cc.bingj.com/cache.aspx?q=marty+baron+speech+may+2016&d=4557245571537608&mkt=en-GB&setlang=en-GB&w=1w5xLsamej0YZUhQSKt84KZHfC_NGDPI

¹⁴ Harari, Youval (2018): *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*

¹⁵ Graystone, John (2016): Addysg Oedolion Cymru / Adult Learning Wales Strategic Plan

organisations'.¹⁶ At a minimum this strategy suggested that groups could set up learner forums or branches, giving them a voice, votes and ownership of the organisation. To maximise its success, a new institutional or national strategy would benefit the involvement of all concerned in its development. It would be 'communicative' (Habermas 1970).¹⁷ A 'shared vision' (Senge 1990) would need to be developed.¹⁸

Sharmer's 'Theory U' could be a useful tool to secure total commitment and its brisk implementation.¹⁹



Our definition of democratic engagement, in the spirit of the above, must be much more than understanding new political structures and taking part in 'representative' democratic processes and official consultations. Ultimately, the success of a devolved Wales will depend on a foundation of 'participatory' democratic activity – individuals collaborating in their communities and taking control of their futures.

In the light of the democratic deficit and the challenges facing communities, there is a strong case not only to adequately fund a broader curriculum but to support all learners with an element of democratic engagement. All tutors, supporting staff and facilitators would

¹⁶ Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales (2017): Democratic Engagement Curriculum.

¹⁷Habermas, Jürgen (1984) [1981]. Theory of Communicative Action, Volume One: Reason and the Rationalisation of Society (Book). Translated by Thomas A. McCarthy. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.

¹⁸ Senge, P (1990). The Fifth Discipline. The art and practice of the learning organisation. Random House.

¹⁹ Scharmer, O (2007): Theory U. SoL, The Society for Organisational Learning.

therefore need to be familiar with the strategy and competent to deliver it. Democratic literacy is as important as other skills. With the cuts to part-time adult learning, it is the most underprivileged who have been most affected and effectively disenfranchised.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 sets out a framework that instructs public bodies to involve communities, with the goal of improving their social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being.²⁰ For this to work effectively, public awareness needs to be increased, and the voices of the disadvantaged sharpened. Essential and vocational skills on their own will not secure sustainable communities – do they not also need context, well-being, creativity and culture?

There should always be a place for specialist tutors and standalone political education classes, from community development and philosophy to feminism, the Welsh political tradition, black history and globalisation etc. (see diagram below).²¹

Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales Rhaglen Ddemocratiaeth Democracy Programme

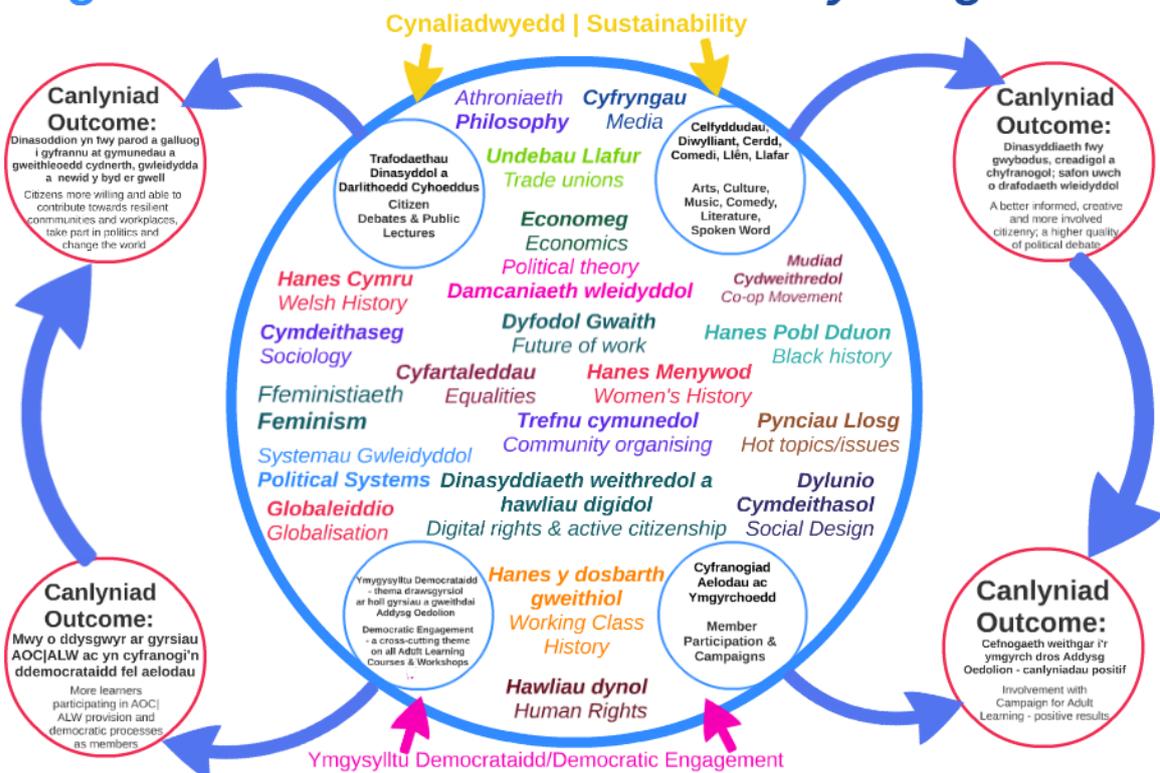


Figure 2: Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales Democracy Programme

²⁰ The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

²¹ Addysg Oedolion Cymru / Adult Learning Wales (2017), *Democratic Engagement Curriculum* by Richard Speight, Dafydd Rhys et.al.

Integrating democratic engagement with other essential and vocational skills

With the changing face of Welsh, European and international politics and the influence of new media and technology new priorities and teaching methodologies are required. Adult learning practitioners need to be acquainted with the range of new technologies and software packages that can empower citizens to engage democratically and campaign. Also, there is a need for tutors to creatively and impartially integrate democratic engagement with other essential and vocational skills, from information technology to the creative arts. We need to give our learners the communication, organisational and scrutiny skills to question and verify facts, challenge opinions, lobby, campaign, solve problems and engage in positive solutions. These non-partisan political courses and cross-cutting themes would encourage tolerance, exchange of views and co-operation. They would nurture the development and articulation of values and views along with an understanding of how to actively promote them locally, nationally or internationally to improve the learners' communities and environment.

In order to enrich and develop the curriculum in these ways, a further influx of expertise, experiences and current practice from other fields and professions is needed. There is a danger however that the bureaucratic over-professionalisation of part-time teaching based solely on assessment and teaching qualifications is deterring many inspirational and first-rate personnel from other professions from sharing their much-needed contribution with Adult Community and Further Education learners. Teaching standards and the quality of the provision must obviously be safeguarded but there needs to be flexibility and common sense in finding a way forward. Accreditation of prior experiences, fast tracking teaching qualifications, team teaching and allowing unqualified tutors to teach up to a certain threshold of hours could be considered. Otherwise, it is the learners who will suffer the consequences as providers have to compromise in the choice of available tutors and sometimes fail to provide courses. Fields such as information technology, basic skills, Welsh medium education and specialist vocational or community courses are particularly vulnerable.

Co-operative Education is a concept that many involved with education do not fully appreciate and would support the Welsh Government's ambitions to achieve a Co-operative Wales. Euros Lewis (2018) from Radio Beca, emphasises the power of local creative co-operative solutions and the inherent nature of the concept in the 'mind set' of the Welsh

language and culture.²² ‘Decolonising yourself’ from often sub-conscious historical, commercial and globalising influences is the first step in facilitating this. A positive, creative, compensating and forward-looking post-colonial framework could well be useful for education strategists.²³ Kate Raworth’s ‘Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries’ (2017) could also be a useful compass to facilitate movement towards an environmentally safe and socially just space in which humanity can thrive (Figure 3).²⁴

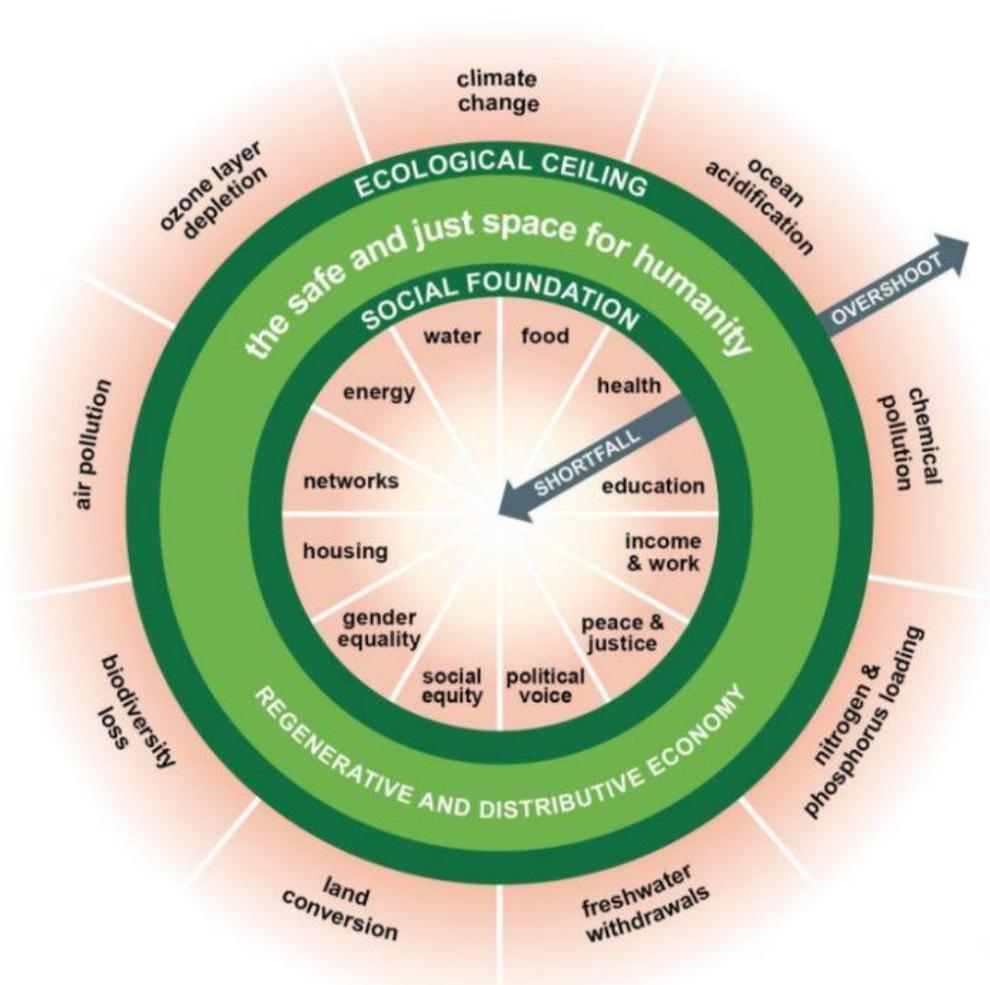


Figure 3: Doughnut of planetary boundaries

²²**Radio Beca** is a media channel for the voice and voices of the 400+ Welsh speaking communities in the three West Wales counties. They use FM Digital, social media and any other possible media. In practical terms, that means linking people and their communities and securing that the passion of their creativity and politics is widely diffused. The aim is to support and strengthen our ability to shape the future of our communities and also, to inspire us to turn our backs on an attitude of ‘there is nothing to do’ towards a dialogue on: ‘What shall we do’, ‘When shall we do it?’ and ‘How shall we do it?’

²³ Rhys, D (2011): Arfarniad o Arweinyddiaeth a Rheolaeth Strategol Addysg Gymraeg a Brodorol gan Ddefnyddio'r Dull Rhwystro-cymell

²⁴Raworth, Kate(2017): Exploring Doughnut Economics. kateraworth.com

Educators, politicians and civil servants could learn a lot from international models such as the Native American model of Community Colleges whose nations are also re-discovering histories and traditions, reviving languages and developing new democracies. Their leaders, educators and learners also have a very strong awareness of their identity and purpose. They value research, have their own publication and celebrate their mission, culture and achievements collectively.²⁵ Developing leadership traits that are based on their traditions and culture is important to them. The Basque Country also has many progressive practices in terms of co-operative enterprise (Mondragon University)²⁶, Basque medium education and Basque for adults.²⁷

Welsh medium education, Welsh for Adults and cultural and language awareness is not only key in securing the Welsh Government's target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050 but can be seen in the same light as programmes such as ESOL in facilitating an inclusive bilingual democracy.²⁸

In practical terms, implementing the above vision means directing and enabling all involved to prioritise democratic engagement (within the over-arching concept of sustainability) as a cross-cutting theme for all provision with specialised standalone courses providing further support. Active engagement and the practical skills involved should feature as prominently as passive academic study. Utilising communication, campaigning and other technologies that facilitate engagement should be key. New resources need to be developed, effective teaching methodologies identified and good practice documented and shared. Relevant accreditation units and qualifications need to be identified and composed. Developing a model of accountable community curriculums was recently discussed at an event focusing on learning for co-operative and associational development.²⁹

It would also be timely to assess whether the mostly appointed governing bodies of Further Education institutions offer the best model in terms of engagement, ownership and accountability. Membership models in the WEA tradition or even co-operative education organisations could be considered. Gerry Hassan (2015), the keynote speaker at the WEA Scotland AGM advocated that such organisations were also crucial 'vessels' in modern

²⁵ TCJ, 2007. Our Story, Our Way. Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education, Vol 19, No 2.

²⁶ Welsh Government Audit Office Basque 'Sharing good practice event', Cardiff, 4 December 2018.

²⁷ Rhys, D (2008): Cymhariaeth o Addysg Oedolion yng Nghymru a Gwlad y Basg yn defnyddio'r Dull Marchnata Pwysigrwydd Perfformiad. (Unpublished paper)

²⁸ Rhys, D (2011): Arfarniad o Arweinyddiaeth a Rheolaeth Strategol Addysg Gymraeg a Brodorol gan Ddefnyddio'r Dull Rhwystro-cymell (MA Thesis)

²⁹ Adult and Community Learning for co-operative and associational development, 23 October 2018

democracies to develop 'values' and channel 'voices' to avoid frustration and alienation from the democratic process.³⁰

Summary

We must challenge any movement towards the kind of politics practised by many populist politicians and secure Wales as a 'post-truth-politics-free zone'! We owe it not only to our citizens, the health of our democracy and quest for sustainability, but also out of respect for our nation's political tradition: from Hywel Dda's pre-medieval egalitarian laws and Robert Owen's Co-operative vision to our influential liberal non-conformist tradition, and Keir Hardy, Aneurin Bevan and Raymond Williams's socialism, Gwynfor Evans's pacifism and cultural nationalism and inspirational and principled groups and campaigns from the Chartists and Welsh suffragettes to Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg and women's support groups during the 1980s Miners' Strike.

It was Aneurin Bevan who advocated the vital importance of truth in politics and his famous quote 'This is my truth – tell me yours' was also the title of a Manic Street Preachers album.³¹ What he encouraged was for politicians to speak passionately from their experiences and to avoid conceited and calculated politics. Learners from different backgrounds will also have many 'truths' of their own derived from their personal life experiences and communities. Our challenge is to give them the tools, encouragement and confidence to articulate their 'truths', shape our future and further unfold the 'long revolution'.

³⁰ Hassan, Gerry (2015): *Caledonian Dreaming*

³¹ Aneurin Bevan, & Manic Street Preachers (1998): Virgin.

Key recommendations

1. The need for a new 'Democratic Engagement Curriculum' and a strategy developed for its delivery
2. Democratic engagement should feature as a cross-cutting theme for all provision together with specialised standalone courses
3. The need for a forward-looking post-colonial framework for education strategists.
4. The need for accreditation of prior experiences, fast tracking teaching qualifications, team teaching and allowing unqualified tutors to teach up to a certain threshold of hours.
5. Practitioners and policy-makers should learn from the WEA and from other post-colonial, co-operative and international models