

Towards an IWCE Network manifesto

Further to updates published in earlier issues of PSE and on the IWCEN website (iwceducation.co.uk), a discussion took place at the Independent Working-Class Education Network meeting in Leeds on 1/11/14. Following this discussion, two further contributions relating to the manifesto were received, and we print them here. (A further meeting to discuss the manifesto will be held at the Swarthmore Centre in Leeds on 31/1/15, all welcome, details from iwceducation@yahoo.co.uk)

Contribution by Frances Thorp:

[The discussion in Leeds was focused on a draft of the manifesto that was organised like a motion, as set out in PSE 77 pp22-23. This 'motion' had three sections, the first notionally preceded by the words 'This Network notes that . . .', the second by the words 'This Network believes that . . .' and the third by the words 'This Network will work to . . .', each being followed by bulletpoints for discussion. Frances's first proposal is to add to the first of these sections as follows:]

This Network notes that:

(Add as another paragraph:)

'Arts education has been eroded and marginalised, as if it is not essential to learning. If provided in schools, working-class arts have tended to be neglected.

Working-class people often have little access to or exposure to the arts.'

[Frances's second proposal relates to a part of the third section (3.8) which read:

[This Network will:] relate to mainstream further and higher education by: putting forward a coherent critique of mainstream FHE provision;

defending access by working-class people to scientific, technological and technical knowledge, understanding and skill; linking the effort to rebuild IWCE to the collective self-organisation of lecturers who try to provide valid education against the grain of FHE, including by encouraging their involvement, under workers' control, in IWCE initiatives.

Adding that 'The named examples of working-class art could be omitted', ***Frances proposes to amend this as follows:***

To the phrase ' . . . defending access by working-class people to scientific, technological and technical knowledge, understanding and skills, ' . . . add the following: ' . . . also to culture and the arts. Art is an expression of our humanity. Arts education should focus on working-class arts, including British painting (for example the work of the Ashington Group), writing (such as that of Sid Chaplin and Sean O'Casey), film and photography (such as Amber Films in Newcastle upon Tyne). It should also address movements from abroad such as American Transcendentalist writing, the Russian Futurists, Brechtian theatre, Latin American revolutionary art and post-colonial black literature. Engaging with working-class art connects people with political and philosophical ideas. Arts education can also inspire creativity and self-expression and encourage people to become involved in collective and community arts activities, performance poetry or drama that can also express political protest'.

Contribution by John Halstead:

I think the section headings on the website, or questions to be answered in an IWCE Network Manifesto are OK. But the questions are not of equal weight or difficulty. In my view, while questions 1 to 3 (Why do we need an IWCE?; What have we done? What does the history of IWCE tell us?) are primary, and those from 4 to 7 about relating to other bodies are secondary (labour movement; TUC education; WEA; mainstream education), the key question is 8 ('Do we need a theory of IWCE?').

This is the key question since we surely do need a 'theory', or, as I would prefer to put it, a philosophy of IWCE, and the way that is crafted determines precisely what we say on all the others.

In producing a philosophy we must consider what meaning can be attached today to the key terms of (1) independence, (2) working class, and (3) education.

Independence

I think we will all agree with Hugo's contribution on the web about what has happened to state-run and state-financed provision; and that previous opportunities for and freedoms within non-vocational provision for the discussion of major political and social issues have been narrowed, or even eliminated, so there is 'no choice' but to develop it outside such bodies.

There is a minor qualification here in that some opportunity may still exist with the WEA, as Jol Miskin argued on Saturday, but I don't think this disturbs the notion of independence in Hugo's contribution: that is, independent from state finance and curriculum or topic discussion control in order to engage in what 'we' determine.

So far so good, and for many this notion of independence will sit comfortably with the claim in 1908 to have freedom to adopt and be taught Marxist ideas rather than liberal or conventionally non-Marxist ideas in matters of economics, politics, sociology and more.

But perhaps this is where the history can be a trap or snare rather than an inspiration for thinking imaginatively about present problems. History moved on. In gaining independence from the embrace of the University of Oxford and 'bourgeois' liberalism was it not the case that independence was being sacrificed in another direction? While the nineteenth-century radical secularists and freethinkers had been liberating themselves from the book and bell of Christianity, were not the 'independent' men of IWCE

putting themselves in thrall to another kind of book and bell? There is more than one kind of dogma.

We all think with an inherited tradition of course, and cannot break completely free from that, as is evident in any discussion of education, but any notion of a truly 'independent' education must, it seems to me, aspire to an ideal of free thought, however defined. The content of free thought is necessarily changing. So perhaps I should say that while I am happy with the idea that free-thought now entails an opposition to the post-1979 neo-liberal orthodoxy, I am not content with a simple return to Marxism or just a crude oppositionism. It seems to me that new thinking is required, including a critical examination of our own traditions. This will evince a true quality of independence.

If so, philosophically speaking, an IWCE movement should conceive of independence in almost anarchistic terms – it points towards an education that develops a critical faculty and, most importantly, a capacity to think creatively, of a self-critical faculty, which can be at odds with group-think or something class-bound.

On the face of it, this creates a difficulty for any notion of IWCE, but it is only after discussion of the other component terms in IWCE that we should see whether here there is a circle that can be squared.

Education

I think it would be a mistake for IWCE to set itself up in opposition to 'training' or the acquisition of skills. Training is less than education, of course, and therefore inadequate, not embodying any kind of independence as defined above. Yet the acquisition of skills is as necessary a part of education as it may be of training, the difference is merely one of range and type of skill. One of the successes of the NCLC was its provision of materials for the acquisition of skills, if fairly basic, through correspondence courses. There is nothing wrong with basic skills: indeed, they are necessary to the later development of other skills. It will be perfectly proper for us to critique the range and content of state-run and state-financed skill provision, but this should not be opposition to skills as such. Indeed, a critique of what we have done so far in IWCE would say that we may have been hot on some topics but neglectful of skills. How many within IWGEN have been reading, in the manner of previous reading groups, referred to by Colin last Saturday, let alone writing, as required by the old industrial day-release courses.

The key tension within education, however, is between learning and creativity: the capacity for truly independent thought. Education necessarily involves

a mastery of the thought and ideas of previous thinkers – the ‘authorities’. There is a mastery of skills in this but also a readiness to accept, for a time at least, that thought at its face value. The learner has to be a passive recipient, a sponge, so to speak, ready to soak up and absorb what is on offer. But complete compliance with authority cannot be satisfactory. It may produce an adept at the manipulation of terms and relations within a scheme of thought, but all human activity is time and context bound so learning from authorities has to be constantly checked against experience through investigations conducted in suitably disciplined ways.

It is through this combined activity – mastery and reflection on the work of the authorities combined with investigation into and to produce new things – that true independence is achieved; that new thinking, the ability to ‘think for oneself’, albeit within a ‘tradition’, emerges, and has implications for the study of both what we wish to oppose and what we tend to favour.

The working class

This hallowed expression raises a number of difficulties which it would surely be unwise to ignore. Like everything else within our experience, social formations are subject to historical change. So, as historians and others have pointed out, the ‘English’ (British?) ‘working class’ at its formation [Thompson] was different from that since at least the revival of socialism in the 1880s to the First World War [Hobsbawm, Savage]; and it was arguably very different again in a period of ‘embourgeoisement’ following the Second World War. Of course, just as it was possible to say ‘the poor are always with us’, we can say the working class is still with us: that is, there are, objectively speaking, social groups whose incomes, status and other scores are less than those of others, putting them in a subordinate position. But within that, the differences in occupational composition, circumstances of community, and so on, create the differences to which sociologists have pointed, which have a great bearing on the subjective nature, or the thinking and behaviour of the class.

Now we have a situation where some might say, in parody of Harcourt’s ‘we are all socialists now’, ‘we are all workers now’! We will find that rather meaningless, but is it very meaningful now to say that there is a working class, conscious of itself and equipped for struggle; or, to express it differently, that there is a working class effectively organised to press for and achieve an alternative to that promoted by others?

Language, and the readiness of ‘Thatcher’s children’, as those born since 1979 have sometimes described themselves, to accept ‘working class’ as a key term in the manifesto is only one of the difficulties. There is no doubt that in the history of adult education those who came to it with a less than happy early schooling felt most comfortable, and were better able to progress to achieve the best of their abilities, when engaged alongside their peers. Unfortunately, the recreation of working-class occupational groups of miners, steelworkers, railwaymen, firemen and even local government workers, for study as of old, seems now impractical. Success was not only achieved with such groupings. It was also achieved with mixed-gender / mixed-occupational groups, which coalesced around the common objective of mature university entrance.

The question for IWCE is whether there is a way of creating something similar to these groups, perhaps in co-operation with trade unions or social organisations of one kind or another. Perhaps the way forward now is through issues rather than class? This was an interesting feature of Saturday’s event: John Grayson and the work with refugees / migrants; Ron and Mick on culture; the groupings around subject areas – economics, philosophy, science. From this point of view, one might ape the practice of many companies: that is, just as BP might never mouth ‘British Petroleum’, IWCE rather avoids banging on about ‘working class’. Some of us may do history for all sorts of private or semi-private political reasons, but it is difficult to argue convincingly perhaps that in the end it is not really ‘history for history’s sake’.

We have to imagine our future. This is more important than dwelling in our past.

Co-operation with Trade Unions, the WEA and ‘social organisations’

If we can create groups of students willing to commit themselves to serious study, either on the basis of shared occupations, concern with particular issues, shared ‘improvement’ objectives, that will be fine. In my view the problem with worker education was less disputes about its appropriate philosophy than that there was never enough of it. The miners and steelworkers, to take two examples, were immensely privileged: many other occupational groups never got a sniff of it! If there is some space for ‘independent’ work within the WEA we should exploit it. The key point should be commitment to sustained study and the achievement of high standards, wherever and with whoever is prepared to co-operate.