

However education in schools is carried out, and whatever its successes or failures, there is no reason that it should stop at 16 or 18 or at 75. Humans are curious animals and throughout their lives they want to find out different things at different stages, experience new experiences at different times and have a rest in between. Formal school education requires a pre-determined process until a defined age, when everything stops and work is supposed to begin. Adult education takes a different view, particularly at a time when work certainly doesn't begin at 16 for a huge number of people. 'Education' should be a lifelong experience - whatever is of value in it should be available to people at whatever stage of their lives that suits them best, and in the form they choose. Some people will want a formal course immediately after school, others might want a part-time course at the same time as doing a job, those with no jobs might want to be involved in some continuing creative process, some retired folk might want to take up something they never had time for earlier on, and others might have no interest in what they see as 'education' at all. But 'education' to some is 'life' to others.

Adults should be able to decide the form education takes. The regular weekly meeting of a course is one form but there are many other models, different types suitable for different people. Traditional adult education seems to cater well for people who want to share specific experiences, such as learning languages, making their own clothes, achieving some sort of fitness - they vote with their feet and we hear of their satisfaction. But where we fail is in actually finding out what people want - if they really know what they want - and initiating some sort of dialogue between the organisers of adult education and the people who are going to use it. The majority of the population don't have any idea of the relevance of adult education to them. That is the fault of adult education and we've got to do something about it.

If high unemployment is with us to stay, education could be the only growth industry. If finances permitted, there would be a great opportunity for people with real time available to develop themselves creatively. The 'Protestant work ethic' is no longer valid in the 1980s and beyond. Adult education's (or Community Education's) role should be to adapt people's view of education to the real world of the 1980s, to encourage people to define education in their own way and to make sure that the organisers come up with the goods.