

# The Knowledge City<sup>1</sup>

Paul Nolan

*“Do you seriously see any purpose for adult learning other than training people for the job market?” The speaker was a senior civil servant from the Department of Education and Employment and, at the launch of the government’s consultation on the future of further education in 1999, the question was turned on Alan Tuckett, Director of the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education. “No,” conceded Tuckett, adding “Except of course in a democracy.”*

It was a point neatly made. The emancipatory tradition of adult education has been expunged from memory by those now writing the future for adult learning, and the hegemony of the labour market in government discourse does not allow for dissenting voices. There is a tendency to blame New Labour (or its control freak wing) for all of this, but the lifelong learning agenda has been rolled out in virtually identical form in every member state of the European Union. The first coherent formulation of the policy came from the European Commission in 1994:

The information society is on its way. A digital revolution is triggering structural changes comparable to last century’s industrial revolution with the corresponding high economic stakes. The process can not be stopped and will lead eventually to knowledge-based economy.

Here in the UK three new major initiatives - the National Grid for Learning, the University for Industry (now marketed as *learnirect*) and the New Library Network - are acting as flagships for the new knowledge revolution. Continuing technological innovations, such as the promise of increased bandwidth, together with the remorseless increase in computer processing power combine with decreasing purchase and user costs to create a vision of a future when education will be delivered via remote access, electronic communication and individualized learning packages. The fact that these developments hove into view at the same point that the calendar took us into a new millennium offered the temptation to pundits to engage in prophecy: a sort of millennium heat rises off the page where the new Jerusalem is described, and the dark satanic mills are replaced with interactive learning points, call centres and e-commerce incubation units.

It sounds impressive, particularly when you roll it all together in a paragraph. But what will it be like? Can we imagine how it’s all going to look? I find my crystal ball is a little cloudier than the ones that other people seem to have. There is an internal misting, which I think I can trace back to two factors. The first is that when I think of the year 2020 I remind myself that is only just as remote - no more, no less - than the year 1980. At that time there was a vogue in television for sci-fi programmes like Blake’s 7 which fantasized a future. These programmes usually featured men in white acrylic polo necks striding purposefully down oval-shaped corridors where sliding doors opened automatically before them. It wasn’t actually very futuristic, when you think of it, though the sci-fi of the period usually included another future, often referred to as the ‘Complete Breakdown of the Social Order’. Dystopias were - and remain - the stock-in-trade of the genre, and technological advances were only of use in helping small bands of survivors ward off the bizarre gangs of marauders roaming the ruins of the post-apocalypse landscapes.

Educationalists must have sunnier natures. The prophecies that are pouring out of the magazines and journals present technological advances as opening the gates to social and cultural advance, all propelled by the new knowledge economy. The Information Society will be a happy place. When I try to conjure up an image of it I think automatically of those architects’ drawings in which perfect looking people enjoy leisurely strolls through beautifully landscaped developments. A handsome

---

<sup>1</sup> In Gardner, J. and Leitch, R. (Eds) (2000) *Education 2020: A Millennium Vision: Issues and Ideas for the Future of Education in Northern Ireland*, pp87-95, Belfast: Blackstaff Press

couple are giving a swing to a laughing child, over in the corner a pensioner takes his ease with a newspaper while a solitary female shopper can be seen carrying her purchases through the trees just coming into bud in the patio area. I can see all of this. My problem is that my vision blurs slightly when I try to see the buildings that give physical shape to the new knowledge society. Professor Tom Schuller from Birkbeck College is fond of making the point that the actual physical architecture of education is a reliable guide to the ideologies and beliefs that inform its practice in various periods, or as Lucy Musgrave, Director of the Architecture Foundation puts it: "If you've not got the right environment and amenities you can't achieve the right learning culture."

Trying to envision my home city, Belfast, reconfigured as a knowledge society I am struck by the thought that I have already glimpsed it. Whenever I get a free Saturday morning I like to go on a journey that takes me through the past, present and future of adult learning. I didn't ever set out to trace this trajectory with such conscious purpose: to be honest it was more or less by accident that the teleological thrust of educational development revealed itself to me. What I like to do, you see, is mooch around town, and it so happens that some of those buildings that stand out as the physical landmarks of Belfast city centre also serve as staging posts in the history of educational development. Less visible, perhaps - or less obvious in their significance - are those structures which, as well as exercising their present-day function, also act as the signifiers for the future. The clues are there, like in an old-fashioned treasure hunt, and in a moment I shall try to identify them.

But first, the past. The bus to the city centre drops me in Wellington Place, just outside the Linenhall Library, our last surviving link with that period of history when Belfast saw itself as a beacon of the Enlightenment or - pitching it even higher - as the 'Athens of the North'. The talk then, as now, was of knowledge. Those who gathered together in the old Linen Hall to drink coffee and also to imbibe the works of the French philosophers believed that a new dawn had arrived for humanity. Knowledge would drive away superstition, ignorance and injustice. Their enthusiasm led them to give organizational shape to their beliefs, and the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge was created. The first librarian of Linenhall, Thomas Russell, a man fluent in Greek, Hebrew and Gaelic, was an enthusiast for the libertarian ideas of the French Revolution, and his enthusiasm was to cost him his life. He was hanged during the doomed rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798, and later immortalized in verse as *The Man From God Knows Where*. His other legacy, the dream of the unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter survives as a potent myth, even if one constantly belied by the sectarian hatred that has shown itself to have the greater staying power.

I make my way down Royal Avenue, to the far end of Royal Avenue in fact, for my first destination is Belfast city centre's other main library, the Central. In 1888, exactly one hundred years after the Linenhall had been created as a private library, fifty citizens petitioned the city council for the establishment of a public library. In October that year the 'Free Library', as it was known, was opened with great pomp and ceremony by the then Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Marquis of Londonderry who declared it would: "... prove a source of universal blessings to all classes of the inhabitants of this growing and flourishing community". The use of religious language was not accidental. To the Victorian mind the spread of knowledge was linked closely with the spread of virtue, and the early enthusiasts of the workers' educational movement like Albert Mansbridge or Archbishop Temple, often used the language of the religious mission to describe their purpose. Spiritual gain of course did not preclude material gain, and the Calvinist work ethic had a strong hold on the citizens of Belfast in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Describing the opening of the Central Library, Hugh Russell writes:

It is almost touching when one reads contemporary accounts of the establishment of the first 'Free Library' in our city, to sense the hope and fervour with which the citizens greeted the grand opening. It was clearly seen as one the ways in which individuals could improve themselves, and as a prestigious investment in a better future.

What wouldn't the Department of Education give for a similar response to a modern initiative? Can anyone imagine cheering crowds turning out for the launch of Individual Learning Accounts or a new *learnirect* Access Point or the newest Enterprise Centre? The air has gone out of the education balloon. The citizens of 21<sup>st</sup> century Belfast, in common with the citizens of Glasgow, Berlin, New York and many other points of the globe have lost confidence in the idea of knowledge. It is no longer seen as the path to eternal life nor, for that matter, does it offer earthly riches - just a few rungs up the ladder.

It is not surprising then to find David Blunkett indulging in a little nostalgia for the moral purpose that infused adult education at the end of the last century. It was ironic, however, that he should have expressed it in the Foreword to the 1998 government document, *The Learning Age*, which was designed to act as a trumpet blast to announce the new lifelong learning agenda. In it he wrote:

We are fortunate in this country to have a great tradition of learning. We have inherited the legacy of the great self-help movements of the Victorian industrial communities. Men and women, frequently living in desperate poverty, were determined to improve themselves and their families. They did so through the creation of libraries, study at workers' institutes, through the pioneering efforts of the early trade unions, at evening classes, through public lectures and by correspondence courses. Learning enriched their lives and they, in turn, enriched the whole of society.

I was a beneficiary of this legacy. This library supported me and all those other working class kids in Belfast who got their break through the 1947 Education Act. 'The Best of All That Has Been Thought or Said': that was the legend, and that was what we were offered. It wasn't always what we picked - we were too grubby and dirty-minded for that - but the Central Library opened up a world to kids who came from houses with no books.

My children don't see it. I take them with me on these trips but the magic isn't there for them. There are books at home and books at school. They whinge, they complain, they strike a deal. They'll come to the library if we also go to McDonalds and the Virgin Megastore. And so we make that short journey back up Royal Avenue, and as we travel those five hundred yards we take a step into the next century. Inside the Virgin store there is a wall which has a huge bank of videos, most of them feature films, but also titles like *How To Play Golf*, *Brush Up Your Spanish* and *A Guide To Aromatherapy*. This is the new learning. According to the Campaign For Learning, more than half of adult learning now is self-directed. The 21<sup>st</sup> century learner wants to learn at his or her own pace, preferably in his or her own house.

A couple of doors up from Virgin, the Waterstone's store is doing good business. If the public library is now left to the elderly and the unemployed it is because the reading public no longer requires a public service. In a real sense the coming of the paperback was the first privatization campaign. Those who browse the tall, stacked shelves of the Waterstone's store today and sit on the leather settees to sip a coffee accept the responsibility of individuals to finance their own reading. They are not exercising their rights as citizens to avail of a public service, rather they accept that their relationship to literature is, at this point, that of the consumer in the store. The paradigm shift is accepted as unproblematic. As consumers it is also unproblematic for them to make the next paradigm shift, into on-line shopping. For Waterstone's the competition is no longer from the other high street chains, rather it is from Amazon and the other Internet book retailers. From Waterstone's doorway it is just a short two minute walk through the dog's hind leg of Lombard Street to the Dixon's store, which sells the computer hardware and software that acts as the major threat to every other retailer in the vicinity. Last Christmas I came into town to find that Belfast's last toy store, Leisureworld, had closed, fallen victim to the remorseless pressure of the competition from Sony Playstation and Dreamcast. And, yes, I admit it. I succumbed to the pressure and bought my youngest a Playstation.

At school he is using a computer. In the year 2020, when he is thirty, he will no doubt be using a much more powerful machine which will provide him with forms of connectivity so novel we cannot even begin to predict them. We can be sure of this though. The government has got it half right. Online learning will wipe out much of what generation after generation had assumed to be the essential and eternal features of education: the teacher in front of the class, the visit to the library, the punctuation of the academic year into fixed terms. Time and space will collapse. Learning will be at the learner's pace. You will be able to do it at your desk, in your time, on the back of a bus, in the pub - anywhere. The physical architecture of education will be barely visible, other than the screens in the corner of public and domestic spaces. In an extraordinary act of transcendence we will go beyond those great behemoths like the College of Technology or the Central Library and gather together in communion in cyberspace.

It's happening already. The University of Ulster, for example, managed before the close of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to run a virtual postgraduate course in Biomedical Sciences, with 120 registrations, one

quarter of those logging on from other parts of Europe, Asia or North America. The next stage is a virtual masters degree in Coastal Management. If this can be seen as a successful entry by a Northern Ireland university into Internet-based distance learning then the very success of the enterprise immediately points the way to the obvious danger. Put simply, why bother with a University of Ulster degree when you could enrol for a professional qualification from Harvard or York or Oxford or Cambridge? The answer to that is likely to be found within the cash nexus: market forces will inexorably force a restructuring of registration fees. As with everything, the new models are being tested in the United States. The University of Phoenix, for instance, is a private enterprise owned by Apollo Communications. It produces its own courseware and, in addition, makes provision for 'course assistants' who can provide student support at local centres. At present it confines its operations to North America and to the post-graduate professional qualification end of the market. However much it expands its market in the future it is still likely to be overtaken by the big players. The big players, in this context, are likely to be a hybrid of an established 'brand name' university like Berkeley, Harvard or Yale with one of the huge private sector corporations such as Time Warner, Disney Corporation or Cisco. Professor Howard Newby describes the process at work:

While the universities provide most of the academic expertise and, crucially, the 'branding' necessary for market credibility, the partners provide production facilities, distribution and marketing, as well as much of the underlying technology, to enable the operation to proceed to proceed on a truly global basis.

What is true for universities is true also for provision at other levels. New partnerships will emerge which will blur the boundaries between education and entertainment, between the world of work and the world of leisure. The think-tank Demos, in its publication *The Creative Age*, paints the picture for us:

Those unable to update their knowledge base fast enough, both on the job and in their own time, are increasingly at risk of marginalization, competing within a shrinking set of low-skill vocations. While qualifications are still integral to personal success, it is no longer enough for students to show that they are capable of passing public examination ... Learners and workers must draw on their entire spectrum of learning experiences and apply what they have learned in new and creative ways.

Phew! It's an exhausting thought. Not only will we have to learn at work, but our social and domestic lives will be colonized by labour market requirements.

Is there any relief from this? To return to Alan Tuckett's heretical thought, will adult learning not be allowed any purpose other than the skilling of the workforce? I think again of that small group who met together in Belfast's old Linen Hall, fired by the hope that the pursuit of knowledge could be allied to the pursuit of justice, and that their fellow citizens could begin to live lives free from oppression and free from bigotry. Or those a century later who left the foundries and the shipyards and the grain mills to pour through the Corinthian pillars of the Free Library, eager to seize the books that brought them new forms of enlightenment, which existed beyond the world of work. When these people gathered in their workers education groups to open further the domain of ideas, they had hold of a truth that this government has failed to recognize. Learning is a social and not just a cognitive activity.

Computer screens allow us to access information, but real change within people occurs through encounters with other people, which is why group learning remains the natural home of the learning experience. We will not, for example, defeat sectarianism through interactive multimedia packages; it will only be by bringing people into direct dialogue that we can expect attitudes and beliefs to shift. If we are to achieve a peaceful society by 2020 it will be because we have learned tolerance. That learning can take place in community centres, lecture theatres, prison recreation rooms, art galleries or trade union halls. It can run alongside individual learning, just as skills training can grow alongside liberal arts education. Adult learning is the broadest of umbrellas.

Imagine then the world of education shrunk to the size of a single building. In one room people are reading for pleasure, in another students are studying for examinations, in another they are learning to use computers. Actually, I've just been to a building like that. I was in the Central Library and called in to look at the new computer suite that has been installed in the ground floor. It

looked like a space station. Gleaming new machines sat on every table, there was the quiet hum of contentment from the users. Some seemed proficient net users, others seemed like they were getting to grips with it for the first time. I don't know for sure but I imagine some of them will use their new skills to try to improve their qualifications to help them enter the labour market. Good for them. Others will use the technology just to access information and - gulp - just to have fun. Let's hope they do. But don't tell the government.