

Making a Case for Adult Learners (A guidebook on Policy Advocacy)

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This workshop focuses on developing a practical guidebook on policy advocacy. This introductory tries to create a temporary structure for discussion, for the exchange of experiences and for building up elements of a future project. The four points of this presentation are:

1. Addressing the concepts of advocacy and policy formation in adult learning
2. Defining the main areas and methods we are interested in
3. Identifying case studies of best practices
4. The aim of the workshop and project

1. The concepts of advocacy:

Thoughts from the book by Anthony Giddens *Runaway World*

Democratising democracy

What is needed in democratic countries is the deepening of democracy itself. Giddens calls it: democratising democracy. Democratising democracy will take different forms in different countries, depending on their background. Democratising democracy means:

- Having an effective devolution of power, where it is still strongly concentrated at national level
- It often implies constitutional reform
- We should also be prepared to experiment with alternative democratic procedures
- Political parties will have to get more used to collaborating with single-issue groups (ecological pressure groups for example)
- Fostering a strong civic culture. A well functioning democracy has been aptly compared to a three-legged stool: the government, the economy and civil society need to be balanced
- The emergence of global information society is a powerful democratising force

Today the European Union itself isn't particularly democratic. It has famously been said of the EU that if it applied to join itself, it wouldn't get in. The EU doesn't meet the democratic criteria it demands of its members. Yet there is nothing in principle that prevents its further democratisation and we should press hard for such change - advises Giddens.

2. Defining the main areas and methods

The conception of democratising democracy translated into lifelong learning policy means:

- overcoming the learning divide and diminishing learning exclusion at local and international level in order to develop an inclusive society in all sense
- widening participation in adult learning at all levels
- giving preference to civil society and non-formal and informal learning (See A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning)

Voluntary organisations and informal learning

What are the characteristic features of these two phenomena? The paper uses the thoughts of the book by V. Mc Givney and the paper by A. Bron. Voluntary organisations are significant providers of education and training. Evidence suggests that informal learning in the community is a starting point for:

- women
- people in manual occupation
- low income groups
- minority and ethnic groups
- people who are geographically or socially isolated
- people who left school at an early age
- people who wouldn't consider formal education as appropriate or relevant to them

Informal learning

Characteristic elements are:

- Learning that takes place outside a dedicated learning environment and which arises from the activities and interests of individuals and groups, but which may not be recognised as learning.

- Non course-based learning activities (which might include discussions, talks or presentations, information, advice and guidance) provided or facilitated in response to expressed interests and needs by people from a range of sectors and organisations (health, housing, social services, employment services, education and training services, guidance services).
- Planned and structured learning such as short courses organised in response to identified interests and needs but delivered in flexible and informal ways and in informal community settings.

Voluntary organisations

Voluntary organisations can be defined as: “Any public, formally constituted, and non-commercial organisation of which membership is optional, within a particular society. Examples include churches, political parties, pressure groups, leisure associations or clubs, neighbourhood groups, and (sometimes) trade unions and professional associations.” Voluntary associations include adult education associations as well, that can be treated as a part of civil society. Surely they played an important role in adult education history and still are important in their contribution to liberal/popular education. (Bron)

Voluntary organisations and informal learning help to overcome obstacles to learner’s progression. Obstacles to learner’s progression:

- financial barriers
- structural barriers (lack of cross sectoral collaboration in developing learning pathways)
- psychological and social barriers (lack of confidence, perception of being too old to attend education) One of the Coalfield development worker explained: “They have had centuries of not needing qualifications in order to go down the pit. Times have changed but attitudes haven’t.”
- suspicion of formal educational providers
- difficulties in adjusting to formal education (enrolment forms can be deterrent to new learners who may also be intimidated by the language used in adult education institution literature and procedures.)

3. Identifying case studies of best practices locally, regionally and globally

a) Local Hungarian examples:

Three theses as a start:

- All the best practices have advocacy side effects
- All your errors are good opportunities for learning from
- Indirect ways of advocacy seem more effective. For example: initiate new, innovative, internationally accepted projects and challenge the national scene of adult learning.

The HFHSS organised an international expert seminar on drafting the new law of adult learning in Hungary in 2000. On the basis of presentations of international experiences, and in collaboration with authorities, the HFHSS used a variety of arguments in advocacy for a better quality drafting during the sessions of the parliamentary committees.

The HFHSS organised an event on the consultation process of *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* in 2001 with a wide international participation. The report on the event influenced the suggestions of the Hungarian Ministry of Education, which, as an obligation of the Ministry, were sent to the Commission of the EU. The HFHSS wanted to have such tasks acknowledged that had not been accepted as tasks earlier although they were important for adult learners. The HFHSS also carried out a simple survey on the reactions of adult learners to the recommendations of the Memorandum. Setting aside the style of the Commission's paper, the HFHSS tried to use the way of communication of ordinary people in a more informal setting. The findings of the consultation pointed out that adults and potential learners identified the most critical points of policy development just as well as, or sometimes even better than experts, the only difference being that learners are not paid for doing so.

b) Regional examples of EAEA's activity 2000

The general aim of advocacy activity is to lobby international bodies that they adapt plans and policies, which respond to the needs of adult learners.

Actions done by the EAEA in 2000 as examples of having advocacy side-effects:

- The EAEA has written responses to the document entitled *Stronger Partnership* issued by the Commission of the EU
- Organised a reception at the European Parliament (conducted by NICAIE) to highlight the importance of lifelong learning challenges and the role of NGO-s

- The EAEA has applied for membership to the Social Platform that is a wider group of NGO-s around the Commission of the EU
- The EAEA produced a policy paper document on lifelong learning, which was circulated widely
- The project Messages for the Future – Analyses of Socrates Projects 1995-99 was conducted by the EAEA. Its relation to advocacy: it both directly and indirectly, enhanced the reputation of the EAEA, influenced decision makers in order to improve the conditions of the future development of programmes. Indirectly, it also showed where the weaknesses and strengths of EAEA itself were.

c) Global example: The Learning Festival Guide

The concept of learning festivals and its variations and extension can be the model for one mainstream in advocacy activity. One good example on global level is the joint production of The Learning Festival Guide.

4. The aim of the Policy Advocacy project

To establish a project to be conducted by the ICAE so that a guidebook on policy advocacy in lifelong learning is produced in order

- to have an exchange of ideas on concepts of advocacy
- to set the criteria of “good practice” in policy advocacy for all levels and for all learning forms
- to collect good practice and to complete the text of an advocacy book
- to post it on the websites of the ICAE/ EAEA and to develop continuing co-operation of advocacy services

Partnerships of such a project that are the most effective in developing progression routes are those which have:

- identified the strengths, resources and skills of each partner
- arrived at agreement and a shared understanding of goals
- secured some stability of funding
- developed mutual trust, openness and transparency in all dealings
- secured the representation of user groups
- established clear communication channels and reporting structures
- established a clear set of tasks and concentrated efforts on achieving agreed priorities

References:

Anthony Giddens Runaway World How Globalisation is Reshaping our Lives, Profile Books Ltd. London, 1999 ISBN 1 86197 207 5

Veronica Mc Givney Informal Learning in Community, NIACE, Leicester, 1999 ISBN 1 96202 730

Agnieszka Bron Civil Society and Biographical Learning Ruhr-University of Bochum (Manuscript. Paper for the conference Active Democratic Citizenship, ESREA network seminar 21-24 June, 2001

The Learning Festival Guide published by NIACE, 2001