

What is 'involvement'?

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The Campaigning Alliance for Adult Learning (CALL) is a linkup between UCU, Unison, the NUS, NIACE and the WEA. Its first open meeting is on 30th September.

If CALL makes it easier for practitioners to talk to one another across institutional boundaries, it may well be a positive step.

CALL has six founding principles. So far as these principles go, few activists are likely to disagree with them. For example, the third one says that 'our education system' should provide 'learner, teacher and community involvement in all levels of decision-making about their learning, wherever it takes place'.

Fair enough. But eventually it will be necessary to be more specific. So what sort of 'involvement' would be worth campaigning for?

First, as regards students. How can adult students be genuinely involved in decision-making about their own learning if their right to decide whether or not to study at all has been taken away? But for young adults that is exactly what the Government is trying to do. The single most prominent spokesperson for CALL - Paul Mackney - has a good record of disagreeing publicly with compulsion. There needs to be a campaign over this issue, whether CALL supports it or not.

Secondly, at the level of teachers and lecturers. Here we should be pursuing the highest achievable level of control by basic grade teachers and lecturers over what they teach, to whom, by what methods, under what conditions, to what ends and in whose interests. That will mean campaigning against measures, including much so-called

'continuing professional development', which are reducing what little control we do have. (Of course, decisions taken by teachers sometimes conflict with what students and/or their families and communities want, but the answer to this is more grassroots democracy, not more bureaucratic direction from above.)

Thirdly, at the level of institutions. We should campaign for colleges, universities and adult education services to be under democratic control. Experience of local authority control in FE prior to 1993 suggests that the best method would be boards of governors elected directly by the public.

Lastly, at the level of decisions by the Government - or by bodies like the LSC - about where funding is to go, the only real chance of making things better is for rank and file movements in unions to evolve their own political voice.

By a strange coincidence, the CALL launch meeting is being held 99 years and 51 weeks after the first meeting of the Plebs League, organised by rail and mining union activists who were students at Ruskin College. Their aim was what they called 'independent working-class education'. This involved them in campaigning to make Ruskin more answerable to the most democratic and forward-looking sections of the union movement, and in campaigning against moves to link it more closely with Oxford University.

Working people need educational independence even more now than they did then. Who better than grassroots teachers and lecturers to put it back on the agenda?