

IN MEMORIAM
John Field (1949-2024)

The 'Learning Professor'

Tom Schuller

John Field and I met as founding members of Warwick University's Department of Continuing Education, in autumn 1985. John had both substantial personal experience of adult education, as a mature student himself and then with a 7-year spell as lecturer in economic and social history at Northern College, and a PhD in the subject which he had completed several years before. I had neither the personal experience nor the doctorate, but John never made any attempt to assert his better qualifications. He was to me, as to everyone else who worked with him, a rigorous but wholly sympathetic colleague.

John was a historian by training and by inclination. The training is clear: a degree in history from Portsmouth, then the PhD at Warwick combined with a professional job teaching history to adults. The doctorate was on training and unemployment in the first part of the 20th century (published as *Learning through Labour: training, unemployment and the state, 1890-1939*, Leeds University 1992), and this period continued to engage his attention: thirty years after the PhD he published a book on the same historical period, this time on work camps (*Working Men's Bodies: work camps in Britain, 1880-1939*, Manchester University Press, 2013). Although for the bulk of his career his professional home was in the education of adults, he maintained a disciplinary historian's eye.

His career took him to different parts of the United Kingdom. I'd guess there aren't many academics who have worked in three of the four nations: after Warwick, John went to Bradford in the North of England, then across the sea to the University Ulster and eventually, after another spell at Warwick - this time as professor of lifelong learning - up to Scotland to the University of Stirling, where as well as holding a chair in lifelong learning he was the Deputy

Principal for Research and Knowledge Transfer. I'm not sure what Wales did to miss out on his talents. In each case he was sensitive to the national or regional preoccupations. One thing common to all these locations is that they gave easy access to hills, or at least countryside, as John was a keen walker.

But his reach extended well beyond the UK. Indeed, possibly John's single most outstanding characteristic was his pervasive internationalism. This was not the weary much-travelled cosmopolitan variety, but a genuine belief that we should understand other cultures and traditions. He was unusually (for an Englishman) proficient in German and French, and spent some time actually teaching in Cologne. He would constantly remind us, personally or at professional meetings, of these different perspectives, intellectual and political. There will be colleagues and friends in many different countries who are mourning his loss.

The list of John's mainstream academic duties and positions is impressive. Positions on editorial boards, on advisory panels and on research assessment reviews are too numerous to mention. I would just highlight John's 5-year stint as a Governor of Newbattle Abbey in Scotland and his membership of Foresight groups in the UK and the EU. He acted as PhD examiner in some 30 universities – a remarkable tally; the news of his death brought immediate tributes from some of those whose theses he had examined, as a rigorous but entirely sympathetic scholar. He engaged extensively in policy forums and committees without ever losing his academic identity.

Work on social capital was one of the major themes of John's writing. I enjoyed working with him and Stephen Baron as co-editors on an early book on the topic, published in 2001. John went on himself to write a very successful book on social capital, published in 2003 and translated into Italian and Turkish (and maybe other languages). It's a sign of its success, and of its quality, that it was republished five years later in a fully revised edition. Many would regard it, in educational circles, as the standard work on the topic.

I was personally delighted to have John as member of the Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning, sponsored by NIACE in 2008-10. John was always a perceptive and constructive member of the Inquiry, often contributing to the discussion with a slightly quizzical air but always with something that would give energy to the discussion. Similarly we worked together on the third UNESCO Global Review of Lifelong Education around 2015, where John's international range of experience combined with his research expertise made him a very valuable participant.

John carried on his reading and writing up to his untimely death. He blog posted as The *Learning* Professor, a nice reaffirmation that each individual carries on learning, or should do so, whatever their status. Lately his communications were more often to do with rugby matches, on which he would offer commentary as rigorous and objective as his adult education scholarship. A generous, vigorous man who exemplified the value of lifelong learning.