

RaPAL journal

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Editorial

This edition of the RaPAL journal celebrates the conference we held at the University of Wales, Newport in June 2009. The conference theme was Sustainable Literacies and, as always, the presenters interpreted the theme in a variety of stimulating and creative ways. This variety is reflected in the format and content of the contributions to the journal and we would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has written for it. As we write this on a dreary November day, the different voices of the writers remind us of the vitality and warmth we enjoyed back in June. We hope you will get a sense of this as you read.

This was RaPAL's first conference in Wales, and both the local context of Newport and the national Welsh context added important dimensions to the event. We were especially pleased to hold the conference in Wales, as previously RaPAL has not been well represented there and we have struggled to recruit members and form networks. However, the enthusiasm of the Welsh colleagues who joined us in Newport makes us confident that this will now change. It's worth reflecting that RaPAL itself continues to be sustained as it is renewed by new members who bring fresh ideas and perspectives.

Amy Burgess and Rachel Stubley

Introducing Newport, South Wales

Rachel Stubley

It was a real pleasure and privilege to welcome the 2009 RaPAL conference to the University of Wales, Newport, and to the city of Newport. Newport is a former Victorian industrial town on the Severn Estuary between Bristol and Cardiff, which flourished as a port, docks and steel town until the 1970s. It had a symbiotic relationship with the Welsh valleys running north from the Severn, as coal and iron ore were mined in the valleys, and brought down to Newport, from where they were shipped all over the world. Although there was poverty and hardship in mining communities, from Victorian times onwards, "adult learning" (at least for working men) flourished here as elsewhere in the UK. There remain fine Working Men's Institute buildings in the area, and Newport Art College (now the university's School of Art, Media and Design) began life as a Mechanics Institute in 1841. Newport has undergone a familiar trajectory for such a town: the severe recession and unemployment of the '70s leading to municipal regeneration, which continues today. In my seven years of living here, two bridges across the Usk and a brand new arts centre have been built, and the 1970s parts of the town centre are currently being redesigned.

Adult learning is still very important for a place like Newport, though how it is viewed both by adult learners and by society in general has probably changed considerably over the last century. For example, whether there is a particular and current crisis in “levels” of literacy and numeracy is debatable. Deborah Brandt (2001) makes the point that judgements about literacy/educational ability may depend on a range of social and cultural factors, including changing expectations of school achievement and the changing status of local industries and ways of life. To illustrate this, she contrasts the lives of two women from small farming communities in the mid West of the USA. Despite very similar educational achievements, farming backgrounds, and similar out-of-school interests in reading and writing, Martha Day (born in 1903) was considered well-educated and became a journalist for a local farming publication, whereas Barbara Hunt (born in 1971) found only low status, casual work at a petrol station and in child care (2001: 30/1). Hearing Brandt talk at an NRDC conference some years ago, I wondered whether this historical contrast might be true of the Welsh Valleys too. The young miners using the working men’s institutes and libraries of the 19th century might find themselves today in literacy classes, labelled as “NEETs” or “socially excluded”. Their uses of literacy may be as skilled and varied as ever, but their social status has radically diminished.

Notwithstanding such challenges, there are many adults in this area who wish to develop their communication and confidence, and many teachers who are keen to develop their professional skills in order to support them. Over the last four years, we have developed teacher education programmes in literacy, Numeracy and ESOL at Newport. I have met many creative and committed practitioners both in the Newport area and across Wales, and I would love to think that having the RaPAL conference in Newport has made a small contribution to supporting and extending adult literacy learning and teaching in Wales.

Beyond the boundaries of this industrial town lie windswept hills, Iron-age hill forts, ancient woodland, Norman castles (defending Norman interests against the Welsh hordes!), Jacobean mansions, estuary mudflats and wetlands, 18th century canals, and steep green valleys... It really is a wonderfully diverse corner of the UK and I am very glad to be living here.

Reference

BRANDT, D. (2001) *Literacy in American Lives* Cambridge. Cambridge: CUP