

The UK/U3A approach to Life Long Learning.

A paper drawn together by Ivor Manley,
Vice Chairman of the Third Age Trust in the United Kingdom.

The Aim of this Paper. From the outset the U3A movement in the UK adopted as one of its fundamental principles that it should base its approach to Life Long Learning on the concept of self-help. This paper sets out in some detail why the Third Age Trust believes that there is a strong case for this self-help approach. It is hoped it will be of interest to the world wide UTA movement.

Background

In September 1981, Peter Laslett, one of the founding fathers of the U3A in the UK and the author of "A Fresh Map of Life" (first published by George Wiedenfield and Nicholson in 1989), set out a total of eight "objects" supported by twenty "principles". These were accepted by the emerging U3A national committee and, although a shortened version was published in 1998, the original statement has influenced the development of the movement in the UK ever since.

Key elements of this statement of objects and principles that have a bearing on a self help approach were as follows:-

“FROM THE OBJECTS.

To provide from amongst the retired, the resources for the development and intensification of their intellectual, cultural and aesthetic lives. In this way to help them to make effective and satisfying use of their freedom from work at the office, shop or factory. To devise methods of doing this which can be afforded in Britain.

To create an institution for these purposes where there is no distinction between the class of those who teach and those who learn, where as much as possible of the activity is voluntary, freely offered by the members of the university to other members and to other people.

So to organise this institution that learning is pursued, skills acquired, interests are developed for themselves alone with no reference to qualifications, awards or personal advancement.

FROM THE PRINCIPLES

The University shall consist of a body of persons who undertake to learn and to help others learn. Those who teach shall also learn and those who learn shall also teach.”

The Self-help Philosophy. Self-help has thus been very much at the heart of U3A activity in the UK from the outset. It has been the experience of the UK that there are, amongst U3A members, those who by background and training during their second age, or even because of an interest developed in their third age, are capable of teaching other members and leading study groups on a wide variety of subjects. Learning from one's peers, or shared learning as many prefer to describe it, has been the main thrust of the UK U3A movement throughout its history. For us the model has worked well with a growth in membership over 21 years to the present total of 526 individual U3As with a total membership of 130,830 members.

At the 2003 Conference of the Third Age Trust, it was argued, to general applause, that self-help learning was seen as "U3A's special identity". Very little use is made of second age

lecturers from the academic world (although that is not to say that there are no joint activities such as study days which involve visiting speakers from Universities and other bodies).

Accreditation. As provided for in the Objects and Principles, the life long learning provided by U3As in the UK does not involve accreditation or certificates of achievement. The informal nature of our study is, in our view, positively to be welcomed, in that it encourages those who might otherwise be put off from third age learning. Our relationships with Universities and Colleges is in this same informal spirit and confined to help in kind and occasional “professional” tutoring on specialist subjects, as provided for in the principles.

Source of Funds. The activities undertaken by the U3As in the UK are almost entirely funded from members’ subscriptions. So, the issue of “affordability” is very important, given that many third agers have only limited financial resources at their disposal. It is our belief that the self-help approach makes a very real contribution to keeping the cost of third age learning at levels affordable by the majority of third agers in our society.

Government investment in our activities is minimal, in contrast to the situation elsewhere where funds are made available from Health and Educational authorities (although such official funding is under increasing pressure).

Some limited Government or public funds are available for U3As in the UK but these tend to be aimed at specific projects and towards developing the U3A movement. Government resources are not available on such a scale as to make it possible to hire lecturers from Universities, even if this was thought to be reconcilable with the self-help principles.

What does Self-help mean in practice? This paper now moves on to consideration of what, in the UK U3A context, self-help learning means in practice. Each local U3A is autonomous but their approach to study is influenced by the principles discussed above and by exchanges that take place between them at national and regional conferences, study days and so on. There is a great deal of commonality in the approach to learning throughout the UK.

To illustrate the nature of U3A learning in the UK, Annex 1 has been prepared. It contains written descriptions of typical U3A learning activities, often written by the group leaders themselves. It covers a range of different subjects and is designed to make clear just what kind of shared self help learning is being enjoyed by U3A groups all over the UK.

The extent of this activity is also well illustrated by a survey conducted in 2003. The variety of subjects studied and the methods of learning adopted by the 374 U3As that completed their returns are briefly summarised in Annex 2. It is clear from this survey that U3As are pursuing an impressively wide range of subjects, essentially on a self-help basis. The survey embraced a total of 8807 study groups, an average of 28 groups for each of the U3As involved. (Extrapolating from those figures it seems likely to be the case that all 520 U3As run in excess of 12,000 study groups or activities). Preferred methods of study are informal study with an input from all group members, structured study steered by one member but with an input from all and formal study led by a member. There was much less use of outsiders as leaders or tutors.

Annex 3 summarises a study of the nature of U3A self-help learning recently undertaken by Dr T.S Chivers, a sociology lecturer now retired from Sunderland University who has since been a member of his local U3A. Dr Chivers throws interesting and informed light on the nature of U3A learning. In his conclusion, Dr Chivers states that :-

“The distinctive quality of U3A learning is that it provides (i) a very informal means of acquisition, (ii) a de-emphasised distance between teacher and participant, (iii) an easy means for movement from one role to another (e.g. participant to convenor or vice versa), (iv) an experiential form in many of the groups, which could lead to reflection and

transformation, (v) a sociable environment, and (vi) a current programme of wholly unassessed study. At the same time, U3A offered forms of learning widely available in educational institutions as a whole: skills, continued learning in a range of subjects, and interactive learning situations.”

Learning Support. The Third Age Trust seeks to provide such support to the U3As in all their activities as they require, notably support for their self-help learning. This learning support is co-ordinated by the Standing Committee for Education (SCE), whose role is to explore and articulate Third Age learning, theoretically and practically, as it has developed within the UK U3A movement. It has in recent years created several support services for use by U3As around the country.

Key elements of this support are as follows:-

a) **The Resources Centre.** The Resource Centre is a collection of non-book materials such as videos, slides, audio cassettes and CD-ROMs on subjects studied by U3A members. This material is made available for short loan periods of three weeks to any group leader or member who would like to use them in support of their study. The loans are free, as are the outward postage costs, and the borrowers are only required to pay the postage for returning the item at the end of the loan. The library of items in the Resource Centre has been built up during the last four years mainly with the aid of lottery grant funds. In some instances, items have been donated by generous individual members or by U3As, who no longer needed them for their own purposes. A catalogue of the items is available from the Resources Centre or on the U3A website.

b) **SOURCES.** The Trust publishes an educational bulletin called SOURCES, which is very well regarded by its readers. It seeks to provide to U3A members with information on how self help learning is undertaken by other U3As and advice on learning and sources of information more generally. The magazine is also an important forum for the exchange of ideas on Learning Support.

c) **Subject Networks.** For many of the subjects studied by U3As, Networks have been set up enabling those in the U3As leading studies on a particular subject to consult, through the network, with others from different U3As already working on similar studies.

d) **Study Days.** When resources permit, Study Days are organised on particular themes, which enable participants from U3As around the country to study aspects of a subject in some depth.

e) **Summer Schools.** Each year, the Third Age Trust organises one or more Summer Schools, which again give U3A participants the opportunity to explore a chosen subject in some depth whilst enjoying a residential experience. Tutors give generously of their time and the quality of the seminars reflects both their dedicated preparations and the enthusiasm of U3A members attending, at their own expense.

f) **On Line Learning.** On line learning courses specially written by U3A members are now available on a variety of subjects. This is a cooperative activity being jointly organised with the Australian and New Zealand U3As. Both Tutored courses and downloadable teaching material are now included.

g) **Learning Support Group.** A recent development, discussed in more detail below, is the creation of a Learning Support Group (LSG). This has been set up specifically to support U3A learning. A further Network of Contacts throughout the country has been added to the Group to enhance its role.

The Role of the Learning Support Group.

U3A Study Groups vary quite considerably in the way they organise their learning (as Annex 2 illustrates). Some groups follow a conventional format and are tutored by a group leader who has a certain expertise in a particular field. Other groups are set up in a more radical way and the role of leader/tutor is often shared as much as possible amongst the members of the group and the expertise is thus a shared responsibility, also. For this reason the work of the Learning Support Group is varied and its role is one of support and advice with emphasis on response to local needs. It does not offer tutor training in the normal sense. The autonomy of individual U3As is always respected.

The Learning Support Group might be asked for advice and ideas on any aspect of running groups or sharing the tutoring responsibility within groups. The LSG can also help with the issues that are involved in setting up a learning group, especially those which do not have obvious tutor/experts to lead them. Such groups often require a special approach but can be very rewarding. Help and advice is also given on ideas for study days and events that U3As may wish to run locally to support their groups and group leaders. Members of the Learning Support Group also join in with such local events if invited to do so.

Another very important function of the Learning Support Group is the dissemination of ideas. The Network of Contacts for Learning Support plays a particularly important role in this respect as they can more easily operate at a local level.

Conclusion. The development of the U3A in the UK has, we believe, demonstrated the advantages of self-help learning. The impact of the U3A and its growth in the UK would have been much less than it has been had attempts been made to rely on support from Government or from the Universities.

We are convinced that the self-help approach has much to offer. Our experience suggests to us that members of the Third Age have the experience and wisdom to teach and lead their fellow members in study of a wide variety of subjects. Furthermore, given the pressures on Government funding and on Universities, we believe that UTAs in many other countries could benefit as we have done from exploiting the potential for educational leadership of their own members.

The Third Age Trust would welcome an international discussion of the role of self-help in third age education. To facilitate this, it intends to publish this paper on its Website, u3a.org.uk. It is understood that it will also be published on the international site www.worldu3a.org

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Third Age Trust.

Annex 1.

Examples of U3A learning activities.

(The descriptions that follow, often in the words of leaders of U3A groups from around the country, are designed to give a full picture of self-help learning as it has developed in the UK.)

Etymology - Abergavenny U3A. “We have had a Latin group since about 1989, engaged mainly in studying Latin literature and contemporary history. A Welsh study group also operated for a couple of years. My own interest in etymology resulted in my being invited to give a talk on "A thousand centuries of language" to the U3A in 1994. This aroused a surprising amount of interest, and I was asked about the possibility of starting a study group.

This has now run for six years, looking at topics from proto-language reconstruction at the academic extreme to word play and idioms at the light-hearted end. In between are the development of Celtic languages, place names, personal and family names, trade terms and product names, the development of number words and their etymology (who could believe that five, cinq, pimp, coig and the kind of punch one drinks are all from the same source?), scientific terms and eponyms, with forays into the sometimes risqué areas of euphemism and solecism!

Basic sources are the numerous dictionaries devoted to the various subjects. We have found the study of the origins of words fascinating, rewarding and often surprising – but not for the prudish! Its appeal is wide for we have 20 - 30 members attending once a month.”

Italian - Cheltenham U3A. “We practised Italian by making a narrative for a performance. We chose a period of Italian life that involved many British people and about which little is known, 1943-1945. The Allies had landed; the Italians had deposed Mussolini and the Germans had invaded. Eighty thousand Allied prisoners were at large with big rewards on their heads, succoured by the local people and trying to make their way either to escape to Switzerland or to rejoin the troops by crossing German lines, or simply to hide till it ended. For the Italians life was dangerous and confusing.

The stories in English, the Italians' memories, the German proclamations, our own members' recollections of fighting and working, made a tale that was interesting, and often amusing and moving. We read it in English to our U3A, taking parts, and in Italian to the Italian Society. We used Harold Macmillan's dry recollections as a linking narration. The interest and pleasure of making the story was almost more in the search than in the result, but it was nice to have others prepared to listen to it”.

Italian - Peterborough U3A “We started an Italian group three years ago. I was dubious about the results, since I had no training as a teacher. Although I spoke the language fluently, I had never studied it properly. Three years later my Italian has improved considerably, and my fellow students seem to have come to no harm either. We now have three classes, Beginner's, Intermediate and Practising Italian. This last class has some of my first students and people at various stages, including one chap whose mother was Italian and who speaks it better than I do.

Our main textbook is the BBC Buongiorno Italia. We used the audio tapes from the beginning and later added the videos. I have found the videos extremely good, with lots of repetition for our failing memories. To this material I add odds and ends of my own and bits and pieces culled from various textbooks. Our local library lets me have each month the file of an Italian newspaper, then thirteen months old. I go through this and pick out material for Practising Italian. We are constantly amazed at what was being served up for our attention a year and more ago.”

Russian - New Forest/Waterside U3A. “Like many other U3A groups we had a serendipitous start and we suffered from an excess of democracy. The group comprised one retired primary teacher who was studying for her Russian GCE and one who wasn't, a couple with a daughter living in Moscow, the mother of a British diplomat with Slavic expertise, an amateur water colourist who had attempted the BBC Russian Course a decade before, a retired BBC sound technician and an octogenarian lady who shamed us all with her clarity of mind and ready grasp of what was for her a totally new subject. After starting as a group we were joined by a Latvian born Russian lady with a beautiful speaking voice and a mountain of tolerance.

Our reasons for joining the group and our expectations, ranged from being able to listen to Moscow radio to reading War and Peace from the original text. Unfortunately we did not have a single clear, achievable goal, acceptable to everyone. This affected our choice of textbooks and took us into a long period of experimentation. We invented our own card games and board games. Our Russian lady created a Russian family and laboriously wrote and photocopied episode after episode of their lives while we struggled with the alien script and rules of grammar. We acquired an Everest of tapes to which none of us listened enough. We all knew what we had to do but life in retirement is so full we all fell short.

There are now seven of us including our long suffering Russian lady. We just want to be able to gossip (which we do in English a lot) in Russian, play Russian scrabble and come closer to thinking in Russian. One thing we have gained is the Russian ability to keep going when a favourable outcome seems remote.”

Latin - Perth U3A “This class is now in its second year and is led by a former teacher of Modern Languages, Hector Calder. The nine regulars have recently been joined by a former Classics teacher who aids the group in its studies. So far, study has been by means of *Ecce Romani*, a course for schools produced by the Scottish Classics Group, and students are now approaching the end of Book 2, having covered all cases of nouns in the first three declensions and all five active tenses (not yet the Future Perfect) of all four conjugations. The books centre on the lives of an imaginary Roman family, the *Comelii* (father, mother, son, daughter, uncle, freedman tutor, slaves and the children's friends), and so offer more than normal Latin practice in first and second person verbs and in the vocative case, since there is a lot of dialogue in the passages.

Students will soon be transferring, at the end of Book 2, to real Latin passages, using *Short Latin Stories* by Peter Dunlop, published by Cambridge University Press: history and legends will become the new vehicles on the road to greater skill in Latin. All of us are indebted to Margot McKinnon, a recently retired Latin teacher in Lanarkshire, who has written the Latin course on which our learning is based. Margot has also provided supplementary materials on paper, at a nominal fee, which students use to enhance their knowledge and skills. The repeat of “*I Claudius*” on the UK Drama digital channel on Sunday nights should also provide lots of video material on imperial life at the time for our new Classical Studies background work.”

Latin - Sheffield U3A. “As there was a Latin Group 1 meeting in Sheffield, which was full when I enquired about membership, I was encouraged to co-ordinate Latin Group 2 in April 1999. There were only two or three of us at first, with faint memories of learning Latin many years ago and with a love of language and literature. We struggled on without a tutor, knowing we could not go much further on our own, until a retired classics teacher agreed to come in October 1999 to teach us. She changed our course book to *Oxford Latin Course* by Baime and Morwood (OUP 1999, full colour second edition), which we can heartily recommend. I quote from the introduction. “This course tells the story of the life of the Roman poet known to us as Horace. His full name was Quintus Horatius Flaccus, but ...we call him simply Quintus.” This framework gives immense scope for background material, including some of the Greek myths, Roman education, religion and society. The illustrations are in a variety of styles and bring vividness to the text, and cartoon humour to the points of grammar being taught.

Five of us meet every week. Our tutor listens to our homework and we correct it, with much good humour and laughter from everyone. We read the next story in Latin in turn and translate; the grammatical points are analysed and next week's homework looked at. The tutor talks over a wide range of related topics filling in our background knowledge - architecture, politics, history.”

Hebrew - Harrow U3A. “Since the Autumn Term 1999, I have been taking the Hebrew Conversation class. This group has proved to be most friendly, small in number but very dedicated to improve their standard of reading and writing. We study from a variety of Hebrew books, and with the aid of a blackboard, I write unfamiliar words, which we find to be a clear and helpful way to learning. I also encourage everybody to use the books they have at home, to bring them to the class, so that I can help wherever necessary. The students find that by coming to the classes, it refreshes their memory of the Hebrew, which they learnt many years ago.”

Music in Northampton “A range of options. Northampton supports four music groups, incorporating Keyboard Tuition. Music Making, Music Appreciation and Music Study. Keyboard Tuition covers both electronic organ and piano, either for individual pupils or small groups The tutor is especially happy to teach the techniques of the electronic keyboard because she says learners can achieve encouraging results fairly rapidly this way. The Music Making Group welcomes anyone who plays a wind or string instrument and who wants to make music regularly together with others. It is led by an enthusiastic clarinet player, who began his study of this instrument only about ten years before retirement. His Clarinet Choir is held in high esteem throughout the East Midlands and beyond.

The Music Appreciation Group was one of the earliest U3A groups to be established in Northampton, and it has always been popular and well attended, with twenty five to thirty members regularly on the roll. The group meets fortnightly, when individual members take it in turn to select and present a two-hour programme of their favourite recorded music, perhaps based on a particular theme or a random collection, whichever suits the preference of the presenter. The members' choices represent a very wide range of musical interest, and while the general trend is mainly classical, its broad and often nostalgic repertoire embraces a rich mixture of taste and style from Max Bygraves to Max Bruch and Anton Bruckner, Vera Lynn to Vaughan-Williams and Vivaldi. Scottish Reels to Slavonic and Polovtsian Dances, or Charlotte Church, Tchaikovsky and Chamber Music.

The Music Study Group grew as an off-shoot from the Music Appreciation Group when a few members expressed an interest in studying serious music in some depth and detail Over the space of three years this group has gradually grown from very small beginnings to a regular attendance of about a dozen or so. Using mainly recorded music, sessions follow the format of lecture discussions, primarily given by the Group Leader, but frequently presented by other knowledgeable group members. Having recently devoted several months to the study of music of the Baroque era, principally that of Bach and Handel members are currently engaged in attempting to tease out some of the defining characteristics of compositions of the Classical period, with particular reference to Haydn and Mozart. Spanning the next twelve months of the curriculum we plan to explore the influence, if any, of previous composers on Beethoven, Beethoven's influence on Brahms, and that of Brahms and Schumann on each other The mode of presentation is shared between CD and video onto a large screen, with mini-disc and piano to illustrate details and draw comparisons, especially comparisons of interpretations on record, which is a popular feature. We have regular members' choice sessions, but rather than just giving sentimental or personal reasons for a choice members are asked to “justify their selection in terms of inherent musical interest and significance”. It is surprising how much such a requirement develops one's musical insight and listening skills! Two or three times a year a live music session is arranged in which a local musician or singer demonstrates a particular instrument or musical style. This Music Study Group meets almost every week throughout the year, some of its best attendances being recorded in August when most other activities have closed down and, from April 2003, the first session of each month will be devoted specifically to the study of opera, both on CD and video, and eventually possibly DVD.”

A different way to learn Art History. “When first I was introduced to Art History it was as a year's preparation for the School Certificate examination. It was war time. In common with many families then, we were not all together and my sister and I were at school far from home. The languid art mistress, a frustrated artist, lectured the class from her dais and passed round post cards of paintings. The subject was "Renaissance Art." This was the beginning of what has become a major interest in my life but the possibility of seeing the paintings that were illustrated on the cards seemed remote in the extreme. Indeed, it was not until just over twenty years ago that the riches in the Vatican Museum and the Uffizi in Florence were revealed to me. Since then several other great cities have added their treasures to my memory.

These later ones have been enhanced by a store of information about the works, which has often been acquired by researching for U3A Art Appreciation courses. My growing collection of art books is a precious part of the resources. Both travelling to the places where the works are housed and buying beautifully illustrated books are expensive indulgences, of course. Now, with the wider ownership of computers and modestly priced modems, an almost limitless store of paintings, sculptures and architecture is available to anyone interested who has the hardware.

It was the richness of the collection of images, along with my background knowledge, which encouraged me to venture into the relatively unknown area of writing an on-line course, when the proposition was put to me. It required guidelines from U3A Australia, the pioneer of on-line courses for isolated third age learners, Jean Thompson's experience and encouragement, and some concentrated thinking before the eight units were produced. This is the moment when the first run is over; the "pilots" have tried the course and evaluated it; the period of revision is starting; the plans for repeating it are being made. Tutoring even a small number of students is time-consuming but enormously rewarding and fascinating. However the task will need to be shared in the future for the wider distribution of the course. The aim of the U3A is that there will be a number of such courses, directed towards both individual learners, especially those unable to attend normal U3A meetings, and group leaders seeking support materials. There is a plan for training and supporting new writers. All that is required is for the volunteers to appear."

From a student Down Under? "It is 38 degrees Celsius. I'm working in the shade of an old almond tree watched by two cockatoos. I'm using a flexible knife - one that has seen better days spreading pate - to cover an old tile with Polyfilla. There is more Polyfilla on my fingers than on the tile but it doesn't matter. This 76 year-old is a child again, bent on discovery and loving it.

When I enrolled for the Italian Renaissance Art Course through U3A Australia, I wondered how it could possibly include practical work. I'm finding out. All the exercises, especially the practical ones, helped me beyond measure to appreciate the skill, hard work and perseverance of artisans and artists working in Fresco, Tempera and Oil. I began to understand the challenges they faced, the competition and the influence of guilds and patrons. I had long admired Renaissance artists and years ago had jostled with other tourists to look at works of art in Europe. But now my eyes were being opened and I was seeing them for the first time. I learned to look for evidence of patronage, perspective, balance, styles, light and shade. The use of symbolism led me into re-visiting Greek and Roman mythology. I read relevant biographies and became fascinated by political, religious and social attitudes of the times. My computer worked overtime. A computer novice, I grew in confidence following the links provided and used the Internet to visit galleries and cities all over the world. Friends came good with early birthday presents of reference books while I rediscovered resources available in my local library.

Diffident at first about offering comment or opinion, thinking I had little to offer, I soon discovered that my contributions were warmly welcomed. My tutor, Audrey Loraine (see the previous contribution), gave me prompt, encouraging and detailed feedback. It was like having a wonderfully informed guide by my side as I explored the many aspects of the units presented. A bonus was being able to get to know other students in the process and maintaining contact with them.

I've enjoyed several courses through U3A Australia but the course in Italian Renaissance Art was the best ever. I wanted it to go on forever. You may not have an almond tree or cockatoos keeping an eye on you, but if an intellectually stimulating, fascinating and friendly programme has an appeal, this could be the one for you."

Phyllis Bassett, South Australia

ASTRONOMY IN TYNE DALE "Our Astronomy Group was started six or seven years ago. The aim was to develop our knowledge and understanding of the subject and emphasis was to be placed on observation and practical work. Since then, a broad range of topics has been covered during our monthly evening meetings. Subjects have included the Solar System, Early Models of the Cosmos, the Work of Galileo and Kepler, the Celestial Sphere, Time, Sundials, Identifying the Constellations, Stellar Evolution, the Sun, the Moon, Galaxies, Telescopes, the Behaviour of Light, Aurorae, and Sunspots.

These evening talks and discussions have been supplemented by a visit to a local planetarium, two visits to a nearby observatory and enjoyment of public lectures on Cosmology arranged by a local University. We have also made use of videos. Our Group Convenor has had a long-time interest in fabricating telescopes using "low-tech" methods which means that several altazimuth-mounted instruments are available for use. The latest (and largest) is a 24cm f/6.5 Newtonian reflector. This was in use last November when we gathered to

watch an occultation of Saturn and it provided us with the means of taking several photographs of the event. These were later put on display at our own U3A AGM.

Other projects have included observing the 1999 solar eclipse (only partial from our site), observing and photographing the Hale-Bopp comet, making a grating spectroscope to display the absorption lines in the solar spectrum, using a telescope and an adapted camera to photograph the lunar surface and using a simple hand-driven camera mount to obtain pictures of star fields.

Our group is small, but interest has been maintained. The major difficulty with regular observing is our unpredictable weather and sessions are often arranged at very short notice or, quite frequently, cancelled. Another problem is light pollution, which is becoming an increasing nuisance. Apparently, there are now only three counties in England where sites suitable for deep-sky viewing can still be found. So we are faced with challenges, but it's still great fun! ”

The British Museum and object based learning: a research project with the University of the Third Age by Margaret O'Brien, British Museum

“I was first approached by Keith Richards, Chair of the Standing Committee for Education at U3A, in early 2002 to discuss how we might work together. We developed the idea of a project whereby U3A members would research objects in the Museum and in the process provide us with much needed information on how and what older people learn in museums. From my point of view as a museum educationalist, the object and its presence are the keys to what a museum is about and museum education is essentially concerned with teaching with and learning from objects. However, there has been little research on how older people learn from objects and, as Keith was quick to point out, U3A members are ideal for such a project because of their distinctive methods of learning from and teaching one another.

We invited 15 U3A volunteers to sign up for a period of nine Friday mornings, to pick an object or group of objects from the BM's vast collection, to develop their own investigation of that object and to report back to the group. Everyone was expected to subscribe to the following mission statement: The aim of the pilot project is to record the value of the British Museum as a resource/or learning, especially object based learning for the experienced older student. In the U3A tradition the group was led by a designated co-ordinator, in this case Joy Blech who was involved in the planning from early stages. We also had the able assistance of a Museum Studies postgraduate intern, Kim Lawson, who was attached to the BM Education Department from Florida State University.

U3A members approached their tasks with enormous energy. Objects chosen ranged from wall reliefs to Victorian household tiles and from Islamic metalwork to Chinese snuff bottles. Themes covered along the way included creativity in older age, attitudes to death and what the skill of the craftsman can tell us about little known societies. The standard of the final presentations to the group was uniformly impressive - whether power point, overhead transparencies or talks with visual aids. What was most impressive however was the infectious enthusiasm for the objects and the generous communication of knowledge not only of the topics but also the different routes of acquiring knowledge in the museum context.

For everyone I think, the high point of the learning experience was the gallery session, when most people had the chance to talk about their object – in its presence in the gallery. The level of shared enthusiasm and interest was inspiring and the whole experience fulfilled the U3A maxim of “teachers must learn and learners must teach”. Thanks to our intern, Kim, the Museum and all who took part have a detailed report of everything we did.”

Comparative History, West Dartmoor U3A. By murmuring to oneself, "William, William, Henry, Steve,/ Henry, Dick, John, Henry three", one can eventually come up with the fact that Edward V preceded Richard III. From a ragbag of memory one could dredge up that *Petruska* came after *L'apres-midi d'un faun* and before *Daphne and Cloe* or that Monet died too soon to see Seurat's *La Baignade*. This linear approach to history, perhaps the result of a compartmentalised education, makes it much harder to know, for instance, what music was being written when Hardy was engaged on *Tess*, and whether he could have ridden a safety bicycle to observe which Prime Minister giving a speech in the House.

In an effort to draw together some strands of history in a way that gave us cross-references from one area of life to another, we decided to study every aspect of a decade. We chose the 1890s as a fruitful period. Meetings were planned to take place monthly. It was emphasised that the group would be pleased to accept any contributions, however slight, and that it was not compulsory to make a contribution. Volunteers immediately offered to speak on politics, transport and popular entertainment. Fifteen meetings later each of the members of the group had made at least one contribution, the more diffident members having been encouraged to offer subjects by the friendly atmosphere of our meetings. We have heard members' accounts of the aristocracy, music, fashion, visual arts, union movements, education, the Navy, the situation of women, literature, monarchy, the Empire and the situation of children.

READING THE WORLD A single U3A Group of about twenty members following a course READING THE MODERN, which metamorphosed into READING THE WORLD. This group has worked for six years and is continuing. It meets fortnightly and discusses mainly literary artifacts illustrative of the Modern Movement but with crucial input from members with knowledge of, say, Music, Art, Science. A syllabus is decided annually well before the commencement of the academic year- in itself a product of meetings of the group deciding an overall theme and allotting research and presentation duties to individuals. The Co-ordinator acts, mainly, as a Chairperson but is expected to provide summation and linking material. Major European works studied have included *Ulysses* (James Joyce), *Dr. Faustus* (Thomas Mann), *Collected Poems* (W H Auden) and *The Golden Bowl* (Henry James) and, throughout its existence, the group has read one volume of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (Marcel Proust) in each academic year. More recently attention has been paid to an international perspective with writers from Africa, Japan, India, Russia, South America and Australia and China forming the focus of discussion.

Chamber Music Group. (Duration three years and continuing.) This is a group of about nine members meeting weekly and mainly composed of musicians who have recently taken up their instruments or who began at a much younger age and have returned to playing now that they have more time. The Co-ordinator is responsible for the choice of repertoire (difficult with wind and string players of varying levels of achievement in combination) and general "leadership" of the sessions but the self-help principle is much in evidence with all members giving advice and encouragement to each other and sometimes undertaking the organisation of a session. From early and rather uncertain beginnings the group has reached a standard which allows public performance to other U3A members to be a possibility.

Social History, Farnborough U3A. "When I first joined the Social History Group over 8 years ago, my enthusiasm for the subject soon led to me being asked to become it's secretary (which in this group also meant chairman of the meeting). The size of the group grew and my friends pointed out that I needed help, so I became leader and a new secretary was appointed. It's as easy as that! To someone who had previously been an engineer it was a totally new scene for me and at times somewhat daunting, but my many new friends contributed much from their own studies so that together we learnt what made us as a nation with all our national characteristics.

Since we went to school long ago history has been largely rewritten by generations of new historians who have done an enormous amount of research. Thus there are now a lot of new books available to read plus, more recently, the huge resource of the internet for members to study before meetings. Sometimes I overhear members say 'why study in a group? If I want to learn something I can easily get a book and read it at home'. Unfortunately, historians are human beings and they each have their own view that is reflected in their writings. A balanced idea of what really happened can only be obtained by reading several books and also by sometimes reading between the lines. Also, individual group members will themselves interpret their reading under the influence of what their own sex, religion and country of origin are. Having group members with a large range of these factors can be most informative. Only by bringing together these various strands of information can we arrive at a true understanding of events.

What constituted our view of social history? Living conditions, quality of life, trade (very important), health, education, culture, law and order (or the lack of it!), industry, farming methods, politics. Immigration and emigration stand out. Today, many people look with apprehension at the number of immigrants into our

country; in reality it has been happening for thousands of years (and not always peacefully) and is a contributory factor into the characteristics of the people we have become.

The experience as a leader has been exhilarating, absorbing, often amusing and even given me some belated self-development. One looks back with fondness at the many characters who have been in the group; the stalwarts who had read extensively, those who asked awkward questions, those who led us into the byways of the subject and those who would try and lead us off at a tangent to the line of discussion. My approach was to allow a reasonably free rein to speakers, try and keep order so that each speaker was clearly heard (not always successfully), and gently draw the discussion back into line when it had wandered too far from the subject. It was also important to allow a lot of good humour to intersperse with the bouts of indignation at past cruel and undemocratic events. One must also constantly be aware that the meetings are an important social occasion for the members and an opportunity for them to renew their friendships with each other.

The message to others is: do not hesitate to join a self-help group and make it work. Most people can learn or relearn a subject and enjoy themselves at the same time. It only needs a little courage to lead a group; you will find that the other members will give you their support and respect for taking it on. Remember that it is in the best spirit of the U3A movement that one both gives and receives, ultimately it is also the most fulfilling.”

European History in Farnborough U3A. “I became involved in this group when five years ago, as a newly retired historian, I was asked to attend a meeting to advise on how to start this new group. I was further asked to sit in as an adviser at the first class. This was so well attended that it was decided to divide it into two groups. One of these had no tutor so, as is the way with U3As, I found myself volunteering to lead it. Someone had to do it and it did seem to be a waste of the knowledge I had acquired over the years not to be ready to use it again.

Of course, I was not only helping the group but I too was being helped to feel useful in retirement and being given a chance to continue my own studies. After five years, I am still learning and the group members are still seeking knowledge for themselves. Although I lead the group, we are very much a learning cooperative. Each member contributes to our discussions, some more than others, but all bring the results of their research to our fortnightly meetings and thus we add to the sum of our knowledge.

I have found it very encouraging to see how enthusiastic the members have become about this subject and how much trouble they take to seek out the most useful books, either from the public library or purchased. And of course the Internet fans always provide us with odds and ends of information- sometimes serious but sometimes hilarious. Our group is the usual U3A “mixed bunch” but we all learn and have fun while doing so. Our shared learning gives us knowledge, confidence but, best of all, new friends.”

Annex 2

A Survey of learning in the UK U3As

In 2003, the Third Age Trust, with funding from the DFES, undertook a survey of the range of study groups and activities run by U3As and the ways in which interests are pursued. The key facts emerging from this survey are summarised below.

Size of the Survey. Questionnaires were sent out to 517 U3As and 374 (72%) were returned. Of those U3As that identified themselves (54 did not), it is possible to say that 24% were small, 46% were medium and 30% were large U3As.

The survey embraced a total of 8807 study groups, an average of 28 groups for each of the U3As involved. (Extrapolating from those figures it must be the case that all 520 U3As run in excess of 12,000 study groups or activities)

Subjects Studied. A breakdown of the subjects mentioned in the survey shows that the following were the most popular subjects/activities:-

Music Appreciation	498	Art Appreciation/Art History	214
Walking/Rambling	492	German Language	209
French Language	444	Literature	203
Painting/Drawing	371	History	201
Bridge	314	Poetry/Poetry reading	196
Computing	291	History Local	192
Book Reading	284	History Family	188
Needlecrafts	267	Spanish Language	181
Gardening	251		
Scrabble	223		
Lunch Club	218		

(Other topics ranged from Spanish Language through Writing, Italian and Current Affairs to Singing/Choirs).

The **size of the groups** covered by the survey ranged from a few very small groups (up to 5) through the majority (over 7000), which were between 6 and 30 to the largest groups up to 100 or more.

Methods used in pursuing interests. Respondents were presented with a list of ten 'ways of pursuing an interest' and asked to give each a mark out of 10 to show their frequency of use within their own USA. The average mark for each method across all responses indicates its overall level of popularity, as follows:

Informal study/discussion on an agreed theme with an input from all group members	7.3
Structured study/discussion, steered by one member but with input from all	6.9
Informal visits to places of general interest	5.8
Social/leisure activities in which learning is not really emphasised	5.8
Formal study led by a fellow USA member	5.7
Visits to specific places as part of a structured programme	5.4
Sporting/physical activities	4.6
Formal presentations by a variety of outside experts	3.4
Planned examination of documentary or physical data	3.2
Formal study course led by an outside expert/academic	1.9

Annex 3.

Learning in the University of the Third Age

A summary of a paper by Dr T.S Chivers.

In this very brief paper, we have set out simply to outline the findings of Dr. Chivers, in a paper in which he “seeks to explore the learning potential of the University of the Third Age”. (A copy of his full paper is available, on request.)

He considers three systems of learning – one in which learning is provided by a study group, one in which it is led by a convenor and finally the learning resulting from being a committee member.

Dr. Chivers was a founder of his own U3A, which is the focus of his study, during which he:

- Observed as a group participant, recording study group sessions;
- Administered written questions to committee members and to members of his psychology and sociology group (group evaluation);
- Led group discussions (also group evaluation) with groups mentioned plus his autobiography writing group, on which he focussed much attention;
- Interviewed nine “members only”, twelve “members and convenors” and six “members, also on the committee”;
- Had informal conversations and discussions;
- Made recordings of walkers on a country walk and of a social history group meeting.

Dr. Chivers demonstrates, by quoting from interviews with learners, how, from their membership of U3A learning groups, they have:

- Experienced personal change;
- Through participation in discussion, perceived a change in their ideas;
- Appreciated the collective sharing of reflections;
- Since participating in a group, found that this can mean stimulation to pursue activities which otherwise would never have been attempted.

Group influence can also lead to members experiencing an identity change and, in a group like the autobiography writing group, where mutual respect had led to a deep understanding of one another, people felt they had achieved considerable development.

In interviews with convenors, Dr Chivers found that there were several convenor “styles”:

- (1) Seminar type leader, following a discipline based programme, perhaps producing handouts, proceeding by asking questions and stimulating discussion throughout the meeting;
- (2) A group leader basing the programme around participant choice and involving participants as leaders in contributing study information;
- (3) Lecture – gives what he/she has prepared, then invites discussion.

Dr Chivers found Style 2 to be the common U3A form, which would lead a convenor to new insights. Becoming a convenor, especially in “Style 1”, is a test, starting with fears about “knowing how to talk, would they be bored, etc.” but feeling a growth of confidence as the convenor learns the skills required.

Convenors spoke of a feeling of responsibility towards a group, making members feel comfortable, setting the ground rules, being a motivator, becoming more aware of how different people are. They felt that they had changed, developed new skills and that new friendships had been made between them and group members. Dr Chivers emphasises how his research and his experience as a study group convenor has shown that in virtually all U3A study groups sociality happens over time – “the learning value of this is the way in which this turns a set of people into an interactive group, where growth takes place”. He states “In subtle ways, convenors were influenced: they became more sociable, more knowledgeable (convening requires background learning), more able to achieve closeness to participants than would often be the case in formal education circumstances.”

Finally, Dr Chivers was anxious to discover whether committee work (an area to which there is everywhere general reluctance to contribute) was seen as learning. There were two distinct attitudes – yes, it was and no, it was not!

In his conclusion, Dr. Chivers pays tribute to the distinctive quality of U3A learning but shows concern at the insufficient numbers of U3A members who are prepared to convene learning groups. He feels that, despite the overall success of U3A, its contribution to local communities could be greater. He suggests that, “at its highest level of performance, third agers can develop what Erikson (1986) calls integrity, in which we bring together aspects of learning into a coherent whole to form more integrated persons”. However, “at its less successful level” he can only say that “U3A at least supports a programme of mental fitness while holding disability at bay.”

The debate about how we learn, how we “teach”, what we give to and take from our membership of U3A is, as ever, ongoing. We hope that this paper will give rise to discussion among U3A members, who will certainly wish to offer their own experiences, opinions, beliefs and reactions to this piece of research, for which we thank Dr. Chivers very sincerely.

S.M.T.
Learning Support Group
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