An Open Letter to WEA Tutors

Dear Colleague

For the last fifteen years I have been working as a full-time tutor in adult education. I must have taught more than a thousand adult students, and I think I have taken every kind of class, from tutorials to short terminals, and helped in every kind of residential course, from summer to weekend schools. It has been a good job, but always, as for most tutors, it has been more than a job. At the risk of repeating what many tutors already know, I want to pass on a few reflections on the kind of job it is and the kind of life it is. This is the best way I know of telling other people about the WEA.

Almost all my pupils came to me through the WEA. I went to the District Secretary in Cambridge, when I returned there after the war, and he found me a class in a village in the Fens, mainly of farm workers. The same summer I went to the General Secretary of the WEA in London, and asked him for similar work in the South West, where I was then planning to move. He put me in touch with the District Secretary down there, and some classes were arranged. Soon afterwards, however, I got a job with the Oxford Tutorial Classes Committee, and went to meet another District Secretary, in the South East. Once again the classes were arranged. In fact, wherever you are in Britain, this organisation exists, and tutors can get in touch with it. But nobody, as I soon learned, should take it for granted. In the South East I joined the WEA District Committee, elected from the many branches in the area. I soon realised the problems of keeping this kind of voluntary organisation going: money problems, inevitable; problems of purpose, as the WEA insisted on keeping its own standards of good work however many difficulties then arose; problems of spirit, as the struggling new branch, or the old branch in temporary decline, cast doubts on the viability of the whole enterprise but gradually gained strength from the experience and determination of the others they met. Any tutor who thinks the WEA exists, ready-made, just to provide him with students, will soon learn differently. The branch at Portslade, the branch at Battle, the branch at Hastings, the student group at Seaford: it sounds very formal on paper, but sometimes these are lively organisations with many people taking part, and sometimes just the odd individual, hanging on with a scratch committee, trying to keep the work going. And the difference isn't an act of God or an act of sociology: it has everything to do with the quality of people and the quality of their vision. I remember now, with deep respect, the very many people I met who gave their time to this work, who went beyond their job to encourage and strengthen it, and who are the WEA. Any tutor who gets in touch with them will be getting in touch with one of the best and deepest traditions in Britain: that of voluntary, independent, serious work. If he is a real WEA tutor — a term we use among ourselves to cover many kinds of people but all with certain qualities of recognition and concern — he will be glad and proud to work with them.

There isn't any rule about how to do it: there never is, in any movement of actual and varying people. I have seen tutors build or save a branch, by giving enough to their students this sense of common purpose. Many tutors work with their local branches and districts, as members of committees or helping to organise special functions. But sometimes I have seen a tutor almost kill a branch, by regarding it as his private recruiting organisation, and by trying to do too much in the wrong way. If you go in as, a tutor you must go in as an equal, trying to share in activity and to spread activity, in a common effort.

But why should tutors do anything like this at all? First, I think, because the WEA represents a vital tradition which we are always in danger of losing and which we can never afford to lose. The organisation of social justice, and the institutions of democracy are worth working for, in the society as a whole. But haven't many of us realised, in the years since the war, that you can have some of these things, or approximations to them, and still not the spirit which is their real life? I've often defined my own social purpose as the creation of an educated and participating democracy. The WEA taught me much, in defining these terms. It has always stood for the principle that ordinary people should be highly educated, as an end justifying itself and not simply as a means to power. Equally it has always stood for the principle that society is a method of common and general participation, and it exemplifies this in its own work. It does not see the good things in society as benefits to be handed down by an elite, or as bargaining counters to win the favours of an electorate. In the end, it has insisted, they will only be good things if people have made them for themselves.

This is worth repeating, in the 1960s, when many people will tell you that the WEA's historic mission is over. With the coming of better opportunities in the schools, the exceptional mind in the poor family is spotted young, and is given a real chance. Yes, but this was never at the heart of the WEA's purpose. Of course the exceptional minds must get their chance, but what about everyone else? Are they

simply to be treated as rejects? The WEA stands for purposes which some people, including some reformers, cannot even begin to understand. It stands for an educated democracy, not for a newly mobile and more varied elite. Its historic mission is as urgent and central today as it was in the 1900s, because its basic challenge stands out much more clearly, and is no longer propped up by simple missionary feelings, that the fortunate should help the unfortunate, or by simple class feelings, that the odd pearl should be picked out of the swineheap. The WEA has never looked at the world in this way, and because it doesn't it is more up-to-date, more genuinely in touch with real needs, than the people who want to persuade us that its fundamental aspirations are simply old stuff. They are joined by the cynics who find it damnably easy to point out how little, comparatively, has been achieved; what a tough fight the WEA is still having. It is quite true: we are fighting for our lives. But *for our lives:* that is the whole point. And it isn't what some abstraction called the WEA now does. It is what we do, as tutors, students and friends.

There is another main reason why tutors should join and work with the WEA. This is a matter of the health of their own academic subject. There are some important examples here. There was the profound stimulus, to all the social studies, from the contact of men like Tawney and Cole with the realities of working-class life and history, through the WEA. There has been, more recently, the profound stimulus to literary and cultural studies, by the fact of contact between tutors trained in academic disciplines, affected sometimes by fashions, and students who live in less specialised cultural worlds and who force the tutors to follow the questions of value right through. This is the reality behind the claim that, in the WEA, tutors and students meet as equals. Of course the tutor knows his own discipline better, and wants to help the students to learn it, but he may not know how his discipline looks to people outside it; may not know the gaps between academic thinking and actual experience among many people; he may not know when, in the pressure of experience, a new discipline has to be created. Working with the WEA is not just a matter of committees, important as they are. It is also a matter of constant experiment in teaching, and the WEA is one of the very few institutions in which this is possible, because of its freedom from external requirements. Just because there can be no reward but increased understanding, the challenge to new and imaginative teaching is constant. This may be a new method in an experienced class, or the profoundly important work with new kinds of students, who have never before made much contact with formal education. In recent years I have discussed DH Lawrence with working miners; discussed television with apprentices in training. To me these have been formative experiences, and I have learned as much as I have taught. A whole world of work is waiting, of many kinds, for all who are ready to try it. The next few years may see a transformation in trade union education, which is of vital social importance. The development of work with women's organisations and young workers is also extremely promising. All this, of course, in addition to the familiar work in tutorial classes and residential courses, where experiment in teaching is often just as important. But none of us can sit back and wait for this to happen. It will only happen as widely as it needs to if we all get in and work.

I have mentioned various kinds of satisfaction and stimulus. I need hardly add that there are regular disappointments, and that the going is often very hard indeed. At the first tutorial class I ever took there were three people present, and one of these had only come to see the thing properly started. We had to join that class with one in a neighbouring village. And then there are the rows in branches, the jealousies, the intrigues, that you can chew over in all their bitterness during the long winter journeys. No good is done by concealing any of this, or the constant national rows about the best way to organise adult education, the sense of continual crisis. It's enough to put anybody off; until you get back a sense of proportion and remember the deep needs, the real pressures, behind it all. You must make up your own mind about this as about all the other things, but I can say, for myself, that if I had these last fifteen years back, to use as I liked, I would want to do the same work again, with my friends, students and colleagues in the WEA: only trying to do it better, by understanding it better. Meanwhile if you think I can help at all, with any question or problem, do write to me, or come and see me. I can always be found care of the WEA.

Yours sincerely,

Raymond Williams (1961)