



Sources No. 2

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Science for U3A groups

There are some notable exceptions but it is a fact that science is very under represented, compared with other

activities, in most U3As. This is so despite frequent expressions of interest in a variety of scientific topics. In Perth U3A we started a group called "Science and Society". It attracted a very good attendance which continued over a second year, and looks set to be popular again for the coming session. So, why are there so few science groups?

The reason is not hard to seek. There are apparently not enough people willing to lead such groups. There are two extreme starting points - you may have a lot of people interested to learn but nobody who has expertise in the subject area, or you may find a leader who has spent his or her professional life working in the field. If you can find professionals, use them. Find out what expertise you have in house. It may surprise you! If you do not have what you are looking for among members, try to recruit. Retired university staff and teachers are often happy to interest others in their science. A local university or college administration could point the way to a willing former member. Other opportunities may turn up. We had a fine session from a molecular biologist who was off work recovering from illness.

The problem with some scientific topics is not that they are particularly difficult but that they require an understanding of a substantial infrastructure. Without this understanding it is all too easy to wander up blind alleys, to struggle with unimportant details and even to get things seriously wrong. Nevertheless, if you cannot get an expert on-line there are still possibilities. Try to get a consultant, even if only occasionally available, to answer your questions and sort out problems. Get a good book. There are now quite a number on various subjects.

Be careful, however, especially in subjects which generate controversy, where the published material can be partisan. If you want to study nuclear waste disposal, do not read only publications from Greenpeace or only from the nuclear power companies. A comparative study of both, preferably with some independent input, might be an interesting and stimulating enterprise.

Finally a word on choice of subject. Ideally you will have a group of people who all want to study the same subject and an expert on tap. In real life it may be necessary to exploit the expertise available and direct it to a topic of interest to a good many people. We started with "Energy", a topic with all kinds of social as well as scientific interest which, as a physicist, I know something about. I would like to alternate biological with physical science and we were fortunate to find a molecular biologist for the following year. Next winter we will "Explore the cosmos" and beyond that, who knows? The world is full of interesting things!

Ian S. Hughes, Perth U3A

The U3A Start-up leaflet (A5), "How to run a course on Science and Society" written by June Perret, is available from the National Office, at 40p plus postage each. See SOURCES No.1 page 8 for multiple copies.

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Co-ordinators' Support Group

At the start of its work the Standing Committee for Education (SCE) designated some of its members as a

group charged with the task of addressing the issue of support available nationally to U3A co-ordinators. ('Co-ordinator' is a working term for group leaders, tutors, leaders, teachers, lecturers, facilitators, organisers etc. used by U3As.) It was realised that a good deal of help was available in many U3As, in some cases as an actual preparation course but more often consisting of occasional meetings to exchange ideas and discuss problems. Regions have mounted events which attracted larger numbers and the ideas generated spread beyond an individual U3A. Involvement of university (continuing education) staff and further education (adult learning) colleagues was reported from some parts of the UK and it was soon acknowledged that U3A members generally seemed to be content with the present situation and fiercely jealous of local autonomy.

The group, therefore, decided to act delicately and to announce its presence through the medium of the Chairman's letter. U3As interested in discussing possibilities were invited to contact the convener and, as a result, three one day seminars have been held (two in London and one in Bristol). Two more are planned in Cumbria and Sussex. Interest has been expressed in many other parts of the country and the time seems appropriate to submit an interim report to SOURCES.

The Support Group seeks to establish whether:

- (a) the enquirers wish to mount some kind of event to attract co-ordinators and those interested in this work
- (b) there is a desire to go it alone with some telephonic/written contact with SCE members
- (c) there is a willingness to plan an event with SCE members who will participate actively
- (d) to involve outsiders, such as local adult education/continuing education tutors
- (e) there is some local issue which should be highlighted during the day or series of meetings
- (f) a venue has been found with, it is hoped, no charge to the U3A or region.

So far, apart from a day organised by the University of Plymouth and delivered by their staff, members of the group have been actively involved in planning, chairing discussion groups, mounting adult learning sessions which can be analysed and writing reports for participants and the Standing Committee for Education. In the case of Plymouth written advice was sought and given. The universities of Westminster and the West of England and Greenhill College (Harrow) provided premises free of charge.

Content has followed a fairly consistent pattern:

- (a) small group discussions on the role of the co-ordinator generally or concentrating on a particular discipline
- (b) some input from the organisers (e.g. adult education issues at Harrow, U3A course construction on a thematic basis at Bristol)

- (c) adult learning situations in which presenters and participants role play the first meeting of a U3A interest group and note the issues which arise
- (d) a return to the small discussion groups to share impressions of the day with reports to a final plenary session
- (e) the circulation of an evaluation sheet

Other structures are, of course, evolving and members of the SCE group are anxious not to suggest that there is a 'good way' to deliver these seminars, just as there is no 'model' for the U3A interest group. Their terms of reference do, however, declare an interest in promoting participative learning and this report would not be honest if it did not reflect this in the work completed so far.

At its last meeting the Co-ordinators' Support Group decided to pursue one particular theme in the academic year beginning this autumn, the particular problems of identifying co-ordinators and establishing interest groups for U3As in mainly rural areas. It is interested in hearing from U3As in this situation and from any group seeking support for their co-ordinators. They can contact the Convenor through the National Office at Harrison Street.

Keith Richards, Convenor, Co-ordinators' Support Group

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What do U3As want from learning?

This was the theme of a small research project conducted on behalf of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) for its *Older and Bolder* initiative, which aims to persuade educational providers of all kinds to recognise, cater for and encourage older learners. An important part of this campaign has been to update basic data about what kinds of learning older people take up and why, and in what numbers.

Mapping exercises on older learners were set up for further education, higher education, and local education authorities. For the study based on communities, it was agreed that U3As wishing to participate would act as a focus. They would survey their own members' activities and suggest ways a community profile of later life learning could be compiled. They would be encouraged to conduct the research themselves, with a modest financial contribution from the national project, and share the results with the research co-ordinator.

Basic data (age, gender and occupational background) revealed an age distribution that peaks in the mid to late sixties for men and women and, for women only, in the late seventies. The average age was just under seventy, but ages spanned 50's to 90's, with the oldest and the youngest being represented entirely by women. The fact that women start their U3A involvement earlier and continue it longer is reflected in the overall gender balance, never less than 2:1 and sometimes greater than 3:1. Occupational background showed a mixture of professional, clerical and technical occupations, with few blue collar backgrounds. There were few women who did not cite some job experience outside the home.

Access data (how and why U3A learning was chosen) showed that most people had come to the U3A through a personal contact, by far the most significant factor, while others had seen local publicity and had followed it up. Key information points were the local library or local newspapers. The motivations for joining a learning organisation such as the U3A were mental and intellectual stimulation, social activities and wider interests, meeting new and like-minded people, pursuing a particular subject or further learning in general, a change in lifestyle (retirement, relocation, bereavement), and the U3A style and format of learning. *(how and why U3A learning was chosen)* showed that most people had come to the U3A through a personal contact, by far the most significant factor, while others had seen local publicity and had followed it up. Key information points were the local library or local newspapers. The motivations for joining a learning organisation such as the U3A were mental and intellectual stimulation, social activities and wider interests, meeting new and like-minded people, pursuing a particular subject or further learning in general, a change in lifestyle (retirement, relocation, bereavement), and the U3A style and format of learning.

Progress data (what members had done or intended to do with their U3A learning) was difficult to identify and resistance was expressed to the implied suggestion that U3A learning should lead to anything else. However almost everyone could comment on what they had got or hoped to get out of their current studies. These included better language skills when abroad, interest, enjoyment, confidence, health, and self-improvement. Some took a further course elsewhere, joined a club or society, taught others what they had learnt, and joined other U3A classes. Very few could not list their non-U3A activities, grouped broadly as 'organisations' and 'activities'.

The balance between educational and social activities in U3A was felt by most to be about right, and clearly many people had joined for both reasons. Members also valued the U3A style of learning because it was self-directed. They could choose from a wide menu and even provide some of the courses themselves. Although classes might require active preparation, which was enjoyed, there was no test or training target to reach at the end. What members made of their learning was up to them and many could see how it had contributed to their self-development in new skills, greater confidence, wider networks and levels of interest. Because older learners have the freedom to follow their own agendas, not those of the workplace, U3A stands out increasingly as a learning opportunity where self-development is the driving force.

Joanna Walker, School of Educational Studies, University of Surrey

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Language - what it is and what it does

This course looked at the history of language and why it is limited to homo sapiens. Discovering how children learn language made a fascinating study, including Chomsky's theory of generative grammar. How many languages are there? Why do they die out? Why is english used universally? What is bad language? A recommended book for the group leader is David Crystal's "*The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*" with its statistics and interesting stories.

The course can occupy two or three years as the group delves into the language of politics, the media, the law,

medicine etc., and the social

implications of the language generally used. If the group comes from a mixed social and geographical background there is the added merit of being able to produce its own material.

Jack Massey, Bristol U3A

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Cinema Appreciation

A Cinema Appreciation Group at Norwich U3A decides at one session which film to see and then discusses it at the next monthly meeting. Many U3As, particularly those in large towns, will be able to obtain the advanced programme from cinemas to make their choice. Those without cinemas could choose a video of the chosen film from their library or hire shop or from a member's own library of recorded films.

The Norwich group aims to see a range of old and new, foreign and British films to cater for most tastes over a period of a few months. Differences of taste make for lively discussions. In order to avoid subjective and rambling

conversation they study the film under these headings.

Direction: was it well directed? any outstanding shots? why is direction important? was it well directed? any outstanding shots? why is direction important?

Acting: were non-professionals used? how were minorities, women, children portrayed? were non-professionals used? how were minorities, women, children portrayed?

Music: did it help? was it appropriate? compare musical and non-musical sequences. did it help? was it appropriate? compare musical and non-musical sequences.

Colour: was it important or vital? was it important or vital?

Sound: non-musical and spoken sound, variations and special effects. non-musical and spoken sound, variations and special effects.

Shape of screen: was wide screen necessary? was wide screen necessary?

Story: believable? what genre? did it work? believable? what genre? did it work?

Identification: did it identify with a particular character? was that intended? sympathy versus identification? did it

identify with a particular character? was that intended? sympathy versus identification?

Relevance: any message, moral or philosophical? any message, moral or philosophical?

Transference: was it an accurate replica of a book or play? was it an accurate replica of a book or play?

The session ends with each giving the film (or video) an enjoyment rating, one star to five.

Mike Freer, Norwich U3A

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Music Appreciation - a new approach

Fourteen U3A music co-ordinators in the Greater London Region had the opportunity in the spring of 1998 to participate in the planning of a workshop and a series of introductory lectures and concerts under the general title of "*Liederreise*".

St. John's, Smith Square, one of London's leading concert venues, wanted to develop its music educational programme, concentrating on the participation of older music lovers. The artistic manager invited U3A to collaborate in this study of German *Lieder* which the well known musicologist, Roderick Swanston, intended to organise with two excellent accompanists, Malcolm Martineau and Simon Over, and a number of young professional singers.

After preliminary discussions over a relaxed sandwich lunch, it was agreed that the text of the songs in German and English should be distributed, in advance, to all participating U3A members free of charge. We were also able to book seats for the workshop and concerts at greatly reduced prices and a month before the public.

The introductory one day workshop led by Roderick Swanston and the master classes by the two pianists and four excellent singers was attended by more than fifty U3A members from different corners of the Greater London Region.

The history and evolution of *Lieder* came alive with Swanston's humorous and systematic introduction of the song cycle, taking us through the works of Beethoven, Schubert, Loewe, Schuman, Mendelssohn, Mahler, Wolf, Berg and Strauss. Each concert began with a repetition of the last two songs of the previous concert, creating a coherent journey. It gave us all a deeper understanding of the link between words and music through the ages.

The most exciting new element of the experience was the bond that was created between the professional performers and the U3A members. The project not only enriched our appreciation of *Lieder* but it established an exploratory approach to U3A music studies by linking professional musicians with enthusiastic amateurs.

The success of the series has set the scene for a similar joint project in 1999. This time we will have a chance to explore French vocal music of the 19th and 20th centuries. Some are hoping to work on the french texts in our french groups, thus linking language and music in our study programme.

There are numerous active music societies and music venues around the country which may welcome similar new educational experiments in order to broaden their audiences. This may be worth exploring by music co-ordinators or groups of music and/or language lovers in other U3As.

The stimulation of breaking out of our closed U3A circuit, without extra cost, was well worth the effort. We found the experience enriching and a welcome dimension to music appreciation in the U3A.

Marion Bieber, London U3A

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Photography

Groups looking to improve their photographic skills can do more than merely enjoy each others holiday snaps and records of family occasions. Apart from learning more of the science and techniques of photography, they can undertake a project of more lasting value.

The environment is changing in both urban and rural locations. Photography groups can use the camera to record the High Street, shop fronts, churches, transport, dress fashions and hairstyles etc. They are all areas of daily life to interest local history societies and current affairs groups. Consultation with the local library or local authority could lead to a project of value to local history.

Epsom and Ewell U3A responded to a local authority competition on the theme of the environment, each photograph being accompanied by a short description recording the photographer's attitude to that environmental issue. There was an attractive prize for the winner.

There can also be commercial benefits arising from the group's activity. Members can often obtain advantageous terms for films by combining their purchases to 'bulk buy'. They can gain concessions on ticket prices at places of interest. They can also make calendars and cards to raise funds for their U3A.

Keith Hughes, Epsom and Ewell U3A

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Resource Centre

I am pleased to have the opportunity through SOURCES to circulate information on the Resource Centre

which is being created at the National Office in London.

The Resource Centre is funded entirely through the National Lottery grant. Its purpose is to collect and lend non-book material to members of the U3A to support their learning programmes. It is not intended to replace existing local collections that members already use but to supply material they cannot easily obtain locally. This material includes slides, videos, CD-Roms and multi-media packs, produced either commercially or by U3A groups.

A collection of art history slides had been purchased before my appointment and my priority has been to organise this material into small slide sets which can be easily posted on loan.

There are about 250 sets of art slides and about 50 sets of architecture slides which are now available. Art is arranged by name of artist. Sets vary in size from a minimum of five slides to packs of forty. There are no notes to go with these sets but each slide is titled and dated. Architectural slides are arranged by country and period. They include classical Greek and Roman as well as European architecture. In response to requests we have bought sets on English architecture which come in packs of twelve with accompanying notes.

I am creating a computerised catalogue of the collection and intend to provide a printed list for groups studying art or architecture. The catalogue is part of a computerised library management system purchased for the Resource Centre. It will run standard library functions, hold records of users and control the loans system. It will manage waiting lists of heavily used items and produce overdue or reminder letters.

Information on our stock in the accessions catalogue is used to create an OPAC (On-line Public Access Catalogue) allowing on-line searching. Members may wish to know what we have on a specific subject, or they may have a general enquiry covering several interests. Others might wish to specify slides only or video but not CD-Rom, for example. The system will answer enquiries easily and quickly, allowing us to send results of individual searches in printed form. At first, searching on OPAC will be done in the Resource Centre but it is hoped that it will be available on the Internet for members to search themselves. OPAC is well designed, easy to use with all instructions on screen, and should not pose problems to Internet users.

All material in the Resource Centre is now available for loan by post. The only cost is the return postage. Items are loaned for three weeks but may be renewed by telephone if there is no waiting list.

Send requests to me at the National Office with full name, address and postcode, telephone number and - most important - the name of your U3A and its registration number which appears on the Membership Certificate of your U3A, held by the chairman or secretary. We will not loan to anyone without that registration number. This is our only security that loans go only to genuine U3A members.

If you have recommendations on material to purchase or can donate material to the Resource Centre, I would be happy to discuss this. We want to collect items which will be useful to as many U3As as possible - the wider the appeal of the material the better.

Elizabeth Gibson, U3A Resource Centre Manager

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Sources - in the next issue

Sources No.3 will be published in February 1999. The Editorial Panel invite contributors to submit articles which will add to the development of learning in other U3As. Articles of about 250 words should be sent to SOURCES at the National Office by 31 December 1998.

The theme for the next issue will be the learning of history. The analysis of U3A course programmes shows that history is studied under no less than 27 headings, including transport, maritime, theatre, greek, garden and fashion. 26 groups study social history and 153 study local history, while 5 groups study oral history. The full list will be published in SOURCES No.3.

What is the best way for U3Agers to take an interest in learning about history?



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